New evidence on the role of the US and France

Who is responsible for the genocide in Rwanda?

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When Hutu militias massacred up to one million people, mainly of the minority Tutsis, in the central African country of Rwanda four years ago, the world media claimed that the killings were simply the result of age-old ethnic tensions. Now evidence has emerged of the deep involvement of the major capitalist powers, particularly France, but also Belgium, the former colonial ruler of Rwanda, and the United States in the events leading up to the bloody outbreak and the genocide itself.

The events in Rwanda were to a considerable extent the byproduct of a struggle for political and economic domination of the continent of Africa. Those who lost their lives, and the millions more who were forced to flee their homes in the course of the catastrophe, were victims of an ongoing struggle between French and American imperialism, which has produced further human tragedies in Zaire and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and threatens countless others throughout Africa.

US President Bill Clinton, who last month made a brief stop in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, as part of his African tour, pledged to help set up international mechanisms to identify genocidal governments and prevent them from carrying out their plans. But evidence brought to light in parliamentary investigations in Belgium and France, and concurrent exposures in the press, confirm that the late French President François Mitterrand, UN officials such as the current Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and Clinton himself played important roles in the Rwandan events.

Recent revelations include the following:

• Belgium, France and the United Nations knew in advance that preparations were being made to exterminate the Tutsi minority in Rwanda, and did nothing to prevent it.

• The French government, which kept the Hutu-led government in power, protected the killers and supplied them with weapons while the massacres were in progress.

• The United States trained the Tutsi forces, who in turn carried out reprisal killings against Hutus when they came to power.

• Both France and the United States attempted to use the Rwandan catastrophe to further their own influence in the region at the expense of one another and other rivals.

A senate inquiry in Brussels into the role of Belgium in the Rwandan events has recently issued a report saying that the Belgian authorities knew as early as 1992 of the preparations for the genocide by a secret military unit in its former colony, and had informed France and other countries.

A South African newspaper, the *Mail Guardian*, reported that in January 1994 the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations was warned by its own military unit in Rwanda that the training and planning for killing Tutsis at the rate of 1,000 every 20 minutes was complete. No action was taken. The head of that department was present UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

On March 3 the National Assembly's defense committee reluctantly opened an inquiry of its own into French involvement in Rwanda between 1990 and 1994. The hearings are scheduled to continue for three or four months. The commission is not a legally binding judicial investigation and will not result in any prosecutions, and some key figures in the Rwandan events are not being called to give evidence. Despite these shortcomings, the revelations from these hearings have been a political disaster for the French government, currently led by conservative President Jacques Chirac and Socialist Party Prime Minister Lionel Jospin.

At the time of the Rwandan crisis, France had a Socialist president, Francois Mitterrand, and a conservative government led by Eduard Balladur. Balladur and three of his ministers told the inquiry last week that France intervened in Rwanda in a humanitarian role. Alain Juppé, who was foreign minister in the Balladur government, said he had "no recollection" of the information supplied by Belgium. But Balladur positioned himself for the possibility that there will be further revelations. Several times he used the expression "as far as I know at the moment."

Two French newspapers, *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, have reported that France supplied arms to the Rwandan government for at least a month after the mass killings began. The slaughter continued for three months. Bernard Debre, a minister in the Balladur government, admitted earlier this month that the arms shipments had indeed continued after the bloodshed started. Debre claimed that France continued its military support for "between five and eight days, perhaps ten days after the massacres started … because we didn't immediately realize what was happening."

France sent more troops to Rwanda at the height of the killings. Critics later claimed that Paris was attempting to slow the advance of the Tutsi Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) and that French forces in the southwest of the country provided a safe haven for the Hutu killers and helped them flee to safety abroad once the RPF came to power.

From 1990 to 1994, France had armed and organized the Rwandan army under the military dictatorship of President Juvenal Habyarimana. Relations with Rwanda were conducted directly from the Elysée Palace, residence of the French president. A special committee included General Christian Quesnot and Colonel, later General, Juan-Pierre Huchon. According to *Le Monde*, this committee directly managed the Rwandan crisis in 1994. The newspaper reported that this was tolerated by the then minister for defense, Francois Léotard, the minister for cooperation, Michel Roussin, and the head of the armed forces, Admiral Jacques Lanxade. Both Léotard and Roussin appeared before the committee last week. Neither Quesnot nor Huchon is scheduled to appear.

Another press account reported that "Operation Amaryllis," the French code name for the evacuation of European civilians in Rwanda in 1994,

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also organized the removal to France of Hutu "extremists" centrally involved in the genocide. At the same time the French military refused to evacuate Tutsi employees of the French embassy in Kigali, who faced extermination. A second evacuation, "Operation Turquoise," was mounted later, as the RPF offensive was on the brink of taking power, to bring Rwandan government and military leaders to safety in France while French officers managed the "transition" to RPF rule.

Rwanda represented a major setback for France in its geopolitical struggle with the United States in Africa. *Le Figaro* and other French publications have said France's main motive for acting in the area was to head off perceived advances by the United States into African territories long considered by Paris to be its area of influence. Balladur's testimony before the parliamentary commission expressed the resentment felt at the United States role in France's Rwandan setback. He accused the United States of training members of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Tutsi-led force that toppled the Hutu-led regime in the midst of the genocide and now forms Rwanda's government. Some RPF cadres received US military training as members of the Ugandan army, and their leader, Maj. Gen. Paul Kagame, underwent training at bases in the United States.

France justified its support for the Habyarimana regime on the grounds that the government was facing overthrow by a minority army, the RPF, which was supported by the government of Uganda. Debre summed it up this way: "What one forgets to say is that, if France was on one side, the Americans were on the other, arming the Tutsis who armed the Ugandans. I don't want to portray a showdown between the French and the Anglo-Saxons, but the truth must be told."

Another question that is occupying the French inquiry concerns the origin of the missiles fired at the plane carrying Habyarimana, whose death on April 6, 1994 triggered the massacres. The plane, on which the president of Burundi, Cyprien Ntaryamira, was also a passenger, crashed after being hit by a missile as it approached the airport at Kigali. The Hutu-led regime blamed the deaths on the Tutsi minority. The crew of the plane, retired French air force personnel, were given the status by France of having "died in action," implying that they were on a mission for the French security forces at the time.

Le Figaro reported March 31 that France had supplied the missiles used in the attack. The two missiles, Russian-made SAM-16 Gimlets, were captured by French troops from Iraq during the Gulf war. The paper said its information came from two retired French officers involved in the Rwandan events. Le Figaro did not publish their names but said they were prepared to testify before the commission.

A Belgian academic, Filip Reyntjens, was also informed by the security services of Belgium, Britain and the United States that the missiles had been captured by France in February 1991. Reyntjens specializes in the Great Lakes region in Africa at the University of Anvers. He suggested that the missiles were supplied by France but fired by rebel Tutsis from the Rwandan Patriotic Front.

Bernard Debre also agreed the missiles were captured from Iraq, but he attempted to rebut the claims of France's responsibility by claiming that the missiles had been captured by the United States during the Gulf war and supplied to the Tutsis via Uganda.

French academics have alleged that French mercenaries commanded by Captain Jacques Barril and working for the Hutu-led government fired the missiles. The argument is that extremist Hutus feared that Habyarimana was about to compromise with the RPF. The articles in *Le Figaro* imply that such a compromise was also unacceptable to certain elements within the French security services who therefore supplied the missiles to whomever shot down Habyarimana.

A US State Department official denied the allegation, but there is no disputing the US role in stoking up inter-tribal warfare in Rwanda, as part of an intensive US campaign to strengthen its position throughout a region once partitioned between France, Britain and Belgium. The chain of events began with the assumption of power in Uganda by Yoweri Musuveni in a US-backed military coup. Uganda became the staging ground for the RPF invasion of neighboring Rwanda, and Rwanda in turn became the base from which Laurent Kabila launched his successful military campaign against the tottering Mobutu regime in Zaire.

The emergence of a virtual US zone of domination in central Africa has come as a major blow to French imperialism. Last August France was obliged to announce a reduction in its military strength in Africa from 8,400 to 5,200 troops. French troops were to be withdrawn completely from the Central African Republic, but garrisons remain in Djibouti, near the Horn of Africa, Senegal, Chad, Gabon and the Ivory Coast.

Earlier this month France attempted to reassure the governments of its former colonies in Africa that it would continue to support the "franc zone" when the French franc is incorporated into the European currency, the euro, in 1999. Countries in the Franc zone are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central Africa Republic, Chad, Republic of Congo, the Comoros, the Ivory Coast, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo.

The revelations of imperialist complicity in the tragedy of Rwanda underscore the correctness of the analysis made by the International Committee of the Fourth International at the time. A statement published on August 1, 1994 pointed to the responsibility of imperialism in Rwanda, declaring that the Rwandan events could not be understood outside of the historical framework of a century of colonial rule, followed by decades of economic exploitation after nominal independence.

The ICFI statement said: "The government, which directed the bloodbath against the Tutsi minority, was armed and supported by France. It was kept in power thanks solely to the intervention of French 'advisers' who freed the country's own military to prepare and execute the slaughter of civilians.

"As for the United States, it has over the past several years carried out imperialist adventures in Panama, Iraq and Somalia... The principal interest of the imperialists lies in utilizing the tragedy of Rwanda as a means of deploying their troops once again on the African continent. Just as in the US intervention in Somalia, the Rwandan disaster is becoming a pretext for the recolonization of the region."

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