

Rwanda—10 years since the genocide

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On April 7, on a hilltop overlooking Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, a memorial was unveiled to those who perished 10 years ago in the genocide. It is estimated that up to 1 million Tutsis and Hutu oppositionists were slaughtered over a period of 100 days. The memorial consists of a museum that sits atop five concrete tombs containing hundreds of coffins filled with the grisly remains of an estimated 250,000 people who were killed around Kigali.

The 10th anniversary of the genocide was accompanied by a row between the president of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, and the French government, as well as much cant and hypocrisy by the representatives of the Western powers. Kagame accused the French of backing the Hutu government forces that carried out the genocide, while the French charged Kagame's Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), backed by the United States, with shooting down the president's plane—the event that signalled the beginning of the genocide.

It was 10 years ago that the United Nations sent in a small military force of approximately 2,000 soldiers to Rwanda to oversee the implementation of the Arusha Peace Accords, meant to establish power-sharing between the Hutu-dominated government and the RPF. Originally based in Uganda and made up largely of the minority Tutsis, the RPF had taken over a significant part of the country and was threatening the capital. Several hundred thousand Hutu refugees had fled the RPF areas, and the sections of the Hutu government and military that organised the genocide were whipping up a frenzy of ethnic hatred. The previous year, tens of thousands, mainly Hutus, had been slaughtered in neighbouring Burundi in ethnic conflict.

Rwanda's President Juvénal Habyarimana was just returning from signing the deal in Tanzania accompanied by the president of Burundi, when a missile hit his plane and it fell in flames onto the gardens of the presidential palace. The peace agreement was wrecked, and the mass killings soon began.

On the eve of the genocide, the head of the UN force, Major General Romeo Dallaire, sent an urgent fax to his bosses at its office headed by the present secretary general of the UN, Kofi Annan. In the fax, he warned that mass slaughter was being prepared against the minority Tutsis and

that he needed reinforcements. He was confident that, with just 5,000 troops under his command, the catastrophe could be averted. The orders he received in reply limited his troops to the protection of foreign nationals. After the murder of 10 Belgian soldiers, the United Kingdom sponsored a resolution at the UN that led to the withdrawal of all but 270 troops. US ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright was opposed to leaving even a skeleton force. Dallaire has written a book entitled *Shake Hands With The Devil*, indicting the UN and the world powers for allowing the genocide to take place. As he said recently, the slaughter “continued for a hundred days under the full glare of the international community.”

Most of the discussion on the anniversary of the genocide focuses on this question: why the UN and the major powers, though aware of the impending genocide, did nothing to protect the Tutsi minority.

Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who was secretary general of the UN in 1994, tried to relieve himself of any responsibility by saying in a recent interview that the UN peacekeeping office didn't pass on Dallaire's fax to him, just a report. Anyway, they got “telegrams like this all the time.” Citing the debacle that followed the US intervention in Somalia as a reason why the US didn't want to intervene in Rwanda, Boutros-Ghali explained that during the Rwanda crisis the official policy of the US under President Bill Clinton was that it was not in their interests to get involved. The US determined that the UN would not intervene either, as the US contributed 30 percent of its budget.

Somalia notwithstanding, it is a myth that the US refusal to back UN intervention in Rwanda, and even refusal to accept the scale of the killings (for a while, the official US position would not use the term “genocide”), can be put down to lack of interest. The US was in fact backing the neighbouring regime of President Museveni in Uganda, from whose army the RPF originated. Whilst officially opposing the RPF using Uganda as a base to invade Rwanda, Museveni tacitly allowed the RPF to build up its forces. The US was quite happy to stand aside while tens of thousands were being slaughtered; it let the RPF clear out the Hutu government, and with it French influence in the area.

Boutros-Ghali also had the temerity to complain that the

French didn't intervene two months earlier at the beginning of the genocide. But France, which had replaced Belgium after independence as Rwanda's main backer, had officers attached to units of the Rwandan army to train them. It continued to support and arm the government during the genocide. As the killing of Tutsis intensified and the RPF took over Kigali, the French launched an invasion under the banner of the UN called Operation Turquoise, supposedly to halt further massacres. The operation provided safe passage out of Rwanda to the Zaire (Congo) border to hundreds of thousands of Hutus, including the perpetrators of the genocide. Leading Hutu military commanders were flown out by the French to bases in the Central African Republic.

Thus, whilst arguments continue about who was responsible for shooting down Habyarimana's plane, there can be no doubt that France and the US were the real powerbrokers in determining that nearly a million people would die.

The present secretary general of the UN, Kofi Annan, whilst expressing many regrets for doing nothing to prevent the genocide, cynically offers more of the same to prevent it happening again—an early warning system. And to minimise the role played in the tragedy by the world powers and the UN, he tries to put a fine gloss on the conditions that exist today in Rwanda. Interviewed recently, he said, "Today Rwanda has much to show the world about confronting the legacy of the past and tackling the challenge of recovery. It is demonstrating that it is possible to reach beyond tragedy and rekindle hope."

This is a lie. It is true that in the last 10 years there have been no massacres in Rwanda itself. However, ethnically based militias have continued to operate in neighbouring Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo and have continued mass killings. Deaths in the Congo war since 1997—and much of the fighting was directly related to the Rwandan genocide—are now estimated to be more than 3 million.

The suggestion that there has been any economic recovery in Rwanda is also false. There is more underdevelopment and more poverty in Rwanda (as well as all of sub-Saharan Africa) now than there was 10 years ago. The continent has been virtually ignored by foreign capital, accounting for just 1 percent of total world investment. To make matters worse, the most densely populated of Africa's countries, Rwanda, spends more on debt repayments to the world banks than it does on health and education. The very conditions that made the genocide possible have burgeoned. Fully 70 percent of all households live below the meagre poverty line, with 35.7 percent of the population living on less than \$1 a day. It is no wonder that life expectancy is 38.2 years.

Half the adult population cannot read or write, and

400,000 children, or one in three, are out of school. Children have fared particularly badly as a result of the genocide. In 1994, 300,000 children were murdered and 95,000 left orphaned. Today there are 613,000 orphans between the ages of infancy and 14 years, 7,000 of whom are street children. The number of orphans has risen dramatically because so many women were raped during the genocide and have died since of AIDS. Out of a total population of 8 million, a very high percentage, 50 percent, are under the age of 18, and, consequently, a very large number of households are headed by children.

One in five children die before they reach the age of 5, and 42 percent of those under 5 are malnourished. Children die from such common complaints as diarrhoea, exacerbated by the destruction of the water and sanitation system. According to Amnesty International, clean water to rural areas would save 6,000 lives annually.

AIDS was already a big problem in 94, but it is estimated that since the genocide the incidence has risen to 9 percent of the population. According to an *African Rights* report titled "Broken bodies, torn spirits living with genocide, rape and HIV/AIDS," most females aged between 7 and 71, whether diagnosed HIV-positive or not, exhibit symptoms of chronic ill health, including stomach pains, repeated infections, and urinary and gynaecological complications, as well as skin eruptions.

What cannot be measured is the terrible psychological trauma suffered by the survivors who either experienced or witnessed unspeakable horrors. This includes atrocities that young children were themselves forced to execute. Today in Rwanda, people often live side-by-side with individuals who butchered their family members, as most of the Hutus who fled Rwanda following the genocide have returned home to their communities.

While 80,000 genocide suspects languish in prison in Rwanda, awaiting trial by community courts, the 200 most serious cases await trial by the UN's International Criminal Tribunal, which sits in Arusha, Tanzania. Ten years after it was set up, this court has produced just 12 convictions and one acquittal.



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