

# French President Sarkozy's visit to Rwanda

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy paid a brief visit on February 25 to the Rwanda capital Kigali, to meet Rwandan president Paul Kagamé. This visit took place 15 years after the 1994 genocide of the Tutsis by Hutu tribal forces, supported by France, which claimed 800,000 victims.

Rwanda broke off diplomatic relations with France three years ago. The French government was then trying to implicate the Kagamé regime in the genocide by investigating accusations that Kagamé's forces had played a role in triggering the genocide, by having the then-Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana's plane shot down.

The aim of Sarkozy's visit—in fact, a stopover that only lasted a few hours—was to renew diplomatic contacts, on condition that France's role in the genocide be overlooked.

Sarkozy repeated the lies disseminated up to now by French government spokesmen, according to which Paris was not aware of what was happening in Rwanda. He deplored “a serious error of judgment, a sort of blindness when we did not see the genocidal dimension of the government of the president who was assassinated, errors in that the ‘Operation Turquoise’ was launched too late and probably with not enough forces”. In 2007, Sarkozy had spoken of the “weaknesses and errors” of the international community, “France included”.

Sarkozy did not want to go so far as the comments of his foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, who in 2008 had spoken of “a French political error”—provoking the anger of French leaders such as Edouard Balladur (prime minister from 1993 to 1995) and Alain Juppé, his foreign affairs minister. Balladur had sent a letter to Kouchner and Sarkozy, insisting that “Kouchner does not honour France.... Nicolas Sarkozy does not need him in government”.

These leaders are fearful of legal prosecution by the International Court of Justice, which is charged with the inquiry into the crimes in Rwanda, and do not want to make confessions.

As for Kagamé, he spoke of a “difficult past” between France and Rwanda. He envisaged participating in the France-Africa conference that will take place in Nice at the end of May.

In a gesture to Kigali, French authorities detained Agathe Habyarimana, Juvénal's widow, on March 3 before releasing her. She has lived in France since escaping from Rwanda through the Congo in 1994 under French protection. She is widely thought to have been a leading member of the Akazu, a small circle of Hutu-extremist Habyarimana associates, who planned and encouraged the genocide.

Though Mrs. Habyarimana has lived in France for some time, the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Expatriates (*Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides*, OFPRA) has repeatedly refused to grant her political asylum. It justified its refusal by noting that there are “serious reasons” to believe she “is guilty of crimes against humanity”.

Kigali had issued an extradition order for her last November. It is not yet clear what legal proceedings she might face. *Jeune Afrique* raised the possibility of an investigation in France, noting that for the time being an extradition to Rwanda is unlikely—“the French justice system is not convinced of the impartiality of the Rwandan justice system”, it noted.

## The French role in Rwanda

On August 5, 2008, the Rwandan government in Kigali had published a 500-page document detailing the role of France in the anti-Tutsi genocide conducted by the Hutu government, France's ally in 1994. The massacres took place while Rwanda was confronted with a crushing economic recession due to the collapse of coffee prices, its principal export crop, and a massive devaluation of its currency, the CFA franc (*franc de la communauté française d'Afrique*, franc of the French community in Africa), demanded by the International Monetary Fund. This currency, linked to the French franc, allowed France to exercise a strong monetary and economic influence on many former francophone African colonies.

The Rwandan government also had to confront an invasion led by the Rwanda Patriotic Front (FPR) linked to American interests, the majority of whom were Tutsis and supported by the US.

In a *Le Monde* article (“In Rwanda, Nicolas Sarkozy must find the right words”), Alain Destexh—the senator who had instigated the commission of enquiry for the Belgian Senate on the genocide in Rwanda, of which he is also secretary—explains the role of France. After the withdrawal of Belgian support for the government of Habyarimana in 1990, France took over the reins: the Rwandan army's troop strength was increased fivefold and arms supplies increased. French troops trained Rwandan forces and even participated in direct fighting against the FPR.

At that time, France was governed by a coalition between the bourgeois left and the right. The French President François Mitterrand was a member of the Socialist Party (PS), and the government was composed of the right-wing Gaullist RPR party. Mitterrand had always refused to speak of the genocide and France's role.

In April 1994, after the death of Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana, when his plane had been shot down over Kigali, the government started to broadcast on the radio, calls for the Interahamwe militia, recruited mainly from among young unemployed Hutus, to carry out the massacre of Tutsis. It has been estimated that between April and June the Interahamwe and other allied militia killed 800,000 people, the majority of them Tutsis, but also including Hutus opposed to the government.

France mounted Operation Turquoise, sending thousands of troops to occupy the south-western region of the country. Operation Turquoise aimed to shelter as many Hutus as possible—including those responsible for genocide, who were more solidly attached to French imperialism. Many of these elements had been able to flee to the Congo and continue to fight. The *Radio Mille Collines* station whose broadcasts orchestrated the massacres, was broadcasting under French protection in the Congo frontier region, controlled by the French Foreign Legion.

According to the *Kigali New Times*, the Rwandan report also exposes French collaboration at the time of the murders and ethnic cleansing: “The French troops adopted a scorched earth policy. They gave the order to three local government authorities, at the Cyangugu, Kibuye and Gikongoro prefectures (administrative regions), to incite the Hutu population to flee en masse to Zaire. They also demanded that the Tutsis who had infiltrated into the refugee camps be presented to them, and that the Interahamwe kill at least a few. In several places in these three prefectures, they let the Interahamwe kill Tutsis under their eyes”.

The French operation had moved the conflict towards the west, to the Congo Democratic Republic, the centre of a regional war that had raged between 1998 and 2003.

Sarkozy's February trip took place as a withdrawal from the east of the Congo of the Monuc, the United Nations intervention force, was being negotiated.

### **The cynicism of the French media**

In its February 26, 2010, editorial (“The right words”), *Le Monde* gave an example of the French media's cynical treatment of the Rwanda tragedy. It described Sarkozy's speech at Kigali as “the right words”, that is, “a partial but exact diagnosis” of the Rwandan events.

In fact, Sarkozy neither presented an accounting of the massacre encouraged and supported by France, nor apologies for any French leaders' complicity. *Le Monde* described these omissions as an

“unspoken element”, about which nobody should apologize: “Rather than contrition, what is left unsaid about the Franco-Rwandan issue calls for reflection and a historical examination”.

*Le Monde* next attempted to whitewash Sarkozy's Rwandan policy by obscure references that it does not explain. In order to intimate to the informed reader that Sarkozy wanted to improve relations with Anglo-American imperialism—allied to Kagamé, and that Paris supports its criminal occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan—the newspaper said Sarkozy's visit broke, “in a salutary way, with the ‘Fashoda complex.’”

The Fashoda crisis, named after a geo-strategic town in Sudan, took place between France and Britain in 1898. The French sent an expedition to Fashoda, which had been evacuated by the British, but the expedition provoked a reaction by Britain, which was determined to guarantee its interests in nearby Egypt. Under the threat of possible conflicts with Britain, French imperialism finally abandoned Fashoda, whilst maintaining a poisonous anti-British atmosphere in France.

In a cynical amalgam, designed to hide French imperialism's role in Rwanda, *Le Monde* criticizes “those who claim, against all evidence, that the French military was an accomplice of the massacres”, a “protagonist” of a “new Dreyfus Affair”.

That is to say, that according to *Le Monde*, the French Army is the target of a campaign similar to the anti-Semitic accusations of espionage brought by the French Army against Alfred Dreyfus in 1894. The difference between the two cases, it must be recalled, is that Dreyfus was innocent, while the French command and government are truly responsible for their role in the genocide. In fact, the common denominator between the Rwandan genocide and the Dreyfus Affair is that, in both cases, the French Army brazenly lied to protect itself.

*Le Monde* concluded that Sarkozy's speech in Rwanda, “far from bringing prejudice to the country's honour, relieves it of a great weight”. In fact, by excusing the French role in the Rwandan genocide, Sarkozy and *Le Monde* are preparing to subject masses across the globe to the next crimes of French imperialism.



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