

Rwandan Genocide: Failure of the International Community?

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DOMINIQUE MARITZ, APR 7 2012

In mid-1994, over 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu were killed in the Rwandan genocide (Destexhe 1994: 3-4). The international community utterly failed to prevent and stop this atrocity. There are numerous interconnected and complex factors that led to international inaction, such as a misguided view of African conflicts, the bureaucratic nature of the United Nations and peacekeeping fatigue in general. However, this essay will focus on three reasons that the authors deem to be the most important ones: First, the “shadow of Somalia”[1] was still present and made states as well as the UN Secretariat unwilling to engage in another Peace Operation in Africa. Second, inaction was due to national interest: the United States decided not to intervene in Rwanda as there was no national interest at stake. France, which had national interests at stake, did not try to save Rwandan lives, but actively contributed to the genocide. Third, due to the media’s failure to report on the genocide there was no internal pressure from citizens that could have influenced policy makers. My argument develops as follows. The major actors[2] – Belgium, the UN Secretariat, the US and France – knew that there was genocide underway in Rwanda; therefore, they had an obligation to prevent and stop the genocide but lacked political will. Each actor will be assessed individually. Following this analysis, I will show that the three factors mentioned above led to inaction at the level of the Security Council, where member states focused on the ongoing civil war rather than discussing the genocide, which would have forced them to act under the 1948 Genocide Convention. Finally, it will be shown that this international failure had horrific consequences for the United Nations Assistance Mission For Rwanda (UNAMIR), which, with neither a robust mandate nor adequate resources, became an eyewitness to the genocide.

Belgium, as the former colonial master of Rwanda, had a deep political connection with that country. When UNAMIR was formed in October 1993, they contributed the largest Western contingent (UNDPI 1996: 231). There were further reasons for Belgian involvement in the mission. After the Cold War, Belgium needed a rationale for keeping a large and well-equipped national army; in order to preserve its status, Belgium tried to present itself as the African peacekeeping specialist (African Rights 1995: 1112). Early on, Belgium knew of the ethnic and political killings so it began to argue for a stronger UNAMIR mandate, but no other state was interested in supporting the mission (Des Forges 1999: 176). After ten Belgian peacekeepers were killed on April 7, one day after the genocide had begun, Belgian public opinion that had been uninterested before, began to lobby for “the boys to be sent home” (African Rights 1995: 1113). In order to save face and not to lose its status as “African peacekeeping specialists”, Belgium began to petition for the complete withdrawal of UNAMIR, which was supported at the Security Council as no other state had an interest in the mission (Des Forges 1999: 618; OAU 2000: 132). UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali (1999: 132) said that Belgium was “afflicted with ‘the Somalia Syndrome’: pull out at the first encounter with serious trouble”. After the debacle with the dead Belgian peacekeepers, the only time the country showed any interest in Rwanda was when Belgian, French and US soldiers came to rescue expats between April 7 and 10 (Melvern 2000: 141). The quick and effective rescue mission of foreigners demonstrated what would have been possible had the international community been serious about stopping the genocide (PBS 2004). Belgium knew about the nature of the killings and had the capacity to prevent and stop the genocide. However, the “shadow of Somalia”, its concerns about losing face and satisfying voters at home stopped them from doing so.

The UN Secretariat is the United Nations’ bureaucratic arm. As such, it passes on vital information to decision-making bodies such as the Security Council, which is responsible for “the maintenance of international peace and

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security" (UN Charter 5(23)). The Secretariat and the Secretary General, however, have come under considerable criticism for failing to pass on information before and during the Rwandan genocide (Barnett 2002: 20; UNGA 2004: 34). Despite ample information about the genocide, staff spoke in terms of a "civil war" and the need to obtain a ceasefire (Des Forges 1999: 628). UNAMIR Force Commander Dallaire (2004: 332) remembers how his "reports [about the genocide] seemed to keep vanishing into the abyss of non-action in New York". As a result, non-permanent members in the Security Council, who rely on the Secretariat for information, did not come to see the killings as genocide (OAU 2000: 128). The Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) only counted a few hundred over-worked staff, who were responsible for 17 missions and over 70,000 peacekeepers (Boutros-Ghali 1999: 141; Power 2001: 87). With large and complex missions in Bosnia and Somalia, Rwanda assumed a low status (Wheeler 2000: 215). Moreover, US president Clinton's blaming of the UN for the dead US rangers in Mogadishu created pressure on the Secretariat. UN staff were determined to avoid another peacekeeping failure, due to concerns that this could mean the end of UN peacekeeping (Des Forges 1999: 595; Independent Inquiry 1999: 41). In Barnett's words (2002: 39), "it is virtually impossible to exaggerate the impact of Somalia on the UN. [...] What would later be dubbed 'the shadow of Somalia' was omnipresent, casting a dark cloud across the headquarters, [...] directing future practices." While the UN staff were "hard-working and honourable individuals", their bureaucratic minds made them believe that they were acting reasonably in withholding important information from the ground in order to save the future of peacekeeping (Barnett 2002: 21).

The United States is often blamed as being most responsible for inaction in Rwanda. This is partly because since the end of the Cold War, "no international action can be taken without the leading role of the United States" (Destexhe 1995: 49). As early as 1993, CIA studies warned of imminent massacres with up to 500,000 potential victims (Des Forges 2000: 141; Power 2003: 339). Before the genocide began, major powers knew "that something terrible was underway in Rwanda" and that there were plans for genocidal killings (Des Forges 2000: 141; OAU 2000: 54). Kuperman (2000: 101) states that by April 20, the US must have known about the genocide. However, since the death of its rangers in Somalia, the US had decided to "stop placing the agenda of the UN before the interests of the US" (Clinton in Melvern 2000: 78). President Clinton, who was worried about his poll ratings after bringing home body bags from African missions, had decided that a range of factors must be met in order for the US to approve future UN peacekeeping missions (Bellamy and Williams 2010: 107-108): The Presidential Decision Directive 25 (PDD-25), although not published until May 1994, strongly influenced US decision-making in April 1994 (Scheffer 2004: 129). Unfortunately for the people of Rwanda, their country did not "qualify" for a US-sponsored peacekeeping operation under PDD-25 (Power 2003: 332).

In addition to the memories of Somalia, the United States had never had "national interest" in Rwanda, one of PDD-25's many requirements (Power 2003: 330; The White House 1994: 2). Power (2003: 335) contends that Washington simply "remember[ed] Somalia and hear[ed] no American demands for intervention". Citizens have a powerful voice in lobbying their government to place topics on the policy agenda. However, there was no such pressure in 1994, owing largely to the absence of international media in Rwanda (Power 2003: 375-361). Reports about the conflict also demonstrate Western misunderstandings of African conflicts: Instead of seeing the killings as extraordinary, there was the belief that "these people do this from time to time" (Power 2003: 351). Government officials realised that they would look ridiculous calling the killings in Rwanda genocide and then do nothing (PBS 2004). Apart from moral obligations, there are also legal requirements. Under the 1948 Genocide Convention, the international community is obliged to act if genocide occurs anywhere in the world (Genocide Convention 1948). This led to a "dance to avoid the g-word" in the US (Power 2003: 359). The US' response to the Rwandan genocide demonstrates all three major reasons for inaction: the "shadow of Somalia" as well as inaction because of a lack of national interest and internal pressure.

So far in this essay, I have considered the roles of Belgium, the UN Secretariat and the US, which failed to prevent and stop the Rwandan genocide due to deliberate *inactions* (Uvin 2001: 87). I now will turn to the role of France, the country with the longest and deepest political and military involvement in Rwanda and whose *actions* directly contributed to the genocide. Although France knew that there were ethnic massacres going on in Rwanda, it continued to give military and political support to the interim government (Melvern 2000: 24; Wallis 2006: 103). In October 1993, when the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) attacked Rwanda from Uganda, France sent troops and weapons in order to support their francophone ally against an "Anglo-Saxon invasion" (Prunier 1997: 101; Wallis

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2006: 104). France, worried about its “prestige and international stature”, sees Anglo-Saxon countries as a threat to its position (African Rights 1995: 1104). This led to quick and deep intervention in Rwanda (Prunier 1997: 105). Janvier Afrika, a former Rwandan Hutu supporter, remembers French involvement in 1992 in Rwanda (in Wallis 2006: 57):

We had two French military officers who helped train the Interahamwe[3]. [...] The French military taught us how to catch people and tie them. [...] I saw the French show Interahamwe how to throw knives and how to assemble and disassemble guns.

A few days after the genocide had begun, the French embassy was abandoned and the only thing left behind was a heap of shredded documents and at least seventy French soldiers (Melvern 2000: 48; Wallis 2006: 70). These soldiers continued to hand out firearms, train the militia and even control check-points and demand to see identity cards, arresting Tutsi and handing them over to the Rwandan army (Melvern 2000: 49; Wallis 2006: 57-61). In France, between April and May, like elsewhere, there was virtually no media coverage about the genocide (Prunier 1997: 277). Therefore, French citizens did not call for an intervention; however, as soon as there was sufficient NGO and media pressure, starting in early June, official French intervention was again contemplated (Prunier 1997: 277). 1995 was an election year in France and every government official wanted to be seen as a ‘humanitarian’ (African Rights 1995: 1139). On June 22, the Security Council authorised a “multinational operation for humanitarian purposes” with a Chapter VII mandate and on 9 July, France began to deploy its troops (UNDPI 1996: 121; 308). However, the real reasons for French intervention were to keep Rwanda francophone by stopping the RPF advance and to send a signal of commitment to other French speaking African countries (African Rights 1995: 1105-1107). While France did have national interest in Rwanda, this did not lead to Rwandan lives being saved. As the only Western country willing to send a force, it could have supported UNAMIR. Rather, France’s role in the genocide was that of a “silent accomplice” (Wallis 2006).

As explored above, the information flow from the UN Secretariat to the Security Council was insufficient. While France and the US were well informed about the genocide, non-permanent members who rely on the Secretariat for their information never heard the truth about the killings in Rwanda; instead of speaking about genocide, the UN Secretariat repeatedly reported about the breakdown of the ceasefire, which legitimised the great powers’ decision not to intervene (Wheeler 2000: 220-1). According to the Czech ambassador at the time, about 80% of the Council’s time was devoted to questions of how to withdraw the peacekeepers, 20% of how to reach a ceasefire and no time at all to discuss the genocide (Power 2003: 361). Security Council states were extremely reluctant to use the word genocide, as this would have bound them to act under the Genocide Convention (Melvern 2000: 177). Additionally, Rwanda held a seat on the Council, where its representative could “openly express his racist philosophy” (Destexhe 1995: 50). At the same time, he passed on information to the Rwandan government about Western apathy, which gave it the impression of moral and legal impunity (Melvern 2000: 112). France, meanwhile, was pressuring its “client francophone African states” on the Council to back all its decisions (Wallis 2006: 107). These Security Council decisions had horrific consequences for Rwandans. On 21 April, two weeks after the death of the Belgian peacekeepers and Belgium’s request for complete UNAMIR withdrawal, the Security Council voted in favour of Resolution 912 (UNPDI 1996: 268), which was to reduce UNAMIR’s troop strength by 90% to 270 troops (PBS 2004). Although the Council established UNAMIR II with a Chapter VII mandate and authorised 5,500 troops in Resolution 918 a few weeks later on 17 May (UNDPI 1996: 282), Western countries were still unwilling to physically or monetarily contribute so that UNAMIR II could not be deployed until the genocide was over (Melvern 2000: 198; UNDP 1996: 122). This allowed France to deploy its own mission. Authors of the Independent Inquiry (1999: 37) conclude that “[t]he Security Council bears a responsibility for its lack of political will to do more to stop the killing”.

In the field, UNAMIR was ill equipped to stop the killings due to “constant pressure by the Security Council on UNAMIR to save money” (Independent Inquiry 1999: 41). First, it did not have a sufficient mandate. UN Security Council Resolution 872, which authorised UNAMIR on 5 October 1993, restricted UNAMIR to simply “monitor”, “assist” and “investigate” under a Chapter VI mandate (UNDPI 1996: 232). The only time Dallaire was allowed to use force other than in self-defence was when he was requested to help with the evacuation of foreign nationals between 7 and 10 April (Power 2003: 352). This shows that Western states simply put the lives of white people above that of Africans. Second, UNAMIR did not have sufficient resources, especially after the Belgian peacekeepers were

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withdrawn: "UNAMIR does not have heavy weapons systems, ammunition, let alone secure transport. [...] Troops [...] were very tired and sickly because of the lack of proper food and medicine" (Dallaire 2003: 319). The result was that UNAMIR had to "watch helplessly as people were being slaughtered right before their eyes" (Prunier 1997: 275). This is even more tragic when one considers that a modest force of 5,000 troops, UNAMIR could have stopped the worst killings (Carnegie Corporation 1997: 68).

In this essay, it was demonstrated that the "shadow of Somalia", national interest and lack of internal pressure, or short "lack of political will", were the main factors that led to the international community's failure to prevent and stop the Rwandan genocide. The main actors Belgium, the US and France had sufficient information on what was going on and the quick and effective evacuation of foreign nationals as well as France's intervention in July show that they also had the capacity to intervene. Furthermore, the Genocide Convention of 1948 not only carries moral but also legal responsibilities. Lack of political will led to the failure of the Security Council, which has responsibility for international peace and security. Its malfunction meant that UNAMIR was never able to protect or save Rwandan lives and became a bystander to genocide. Recognition of international failure to prevent and stop the Rwandan genocide should be the first step in ensuring that it will never again fail another state in the face of genocide.

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[1] In 1993 in Somalia, US troops attempted to apprehend local warlord Aideed but their helicopter was shot down and 18 US rangers died. It was seen as "the greatest military humiliation for America since Vietnam" and after the incident, America withdrew all their soldiers (Melvern 2000: 80). Although it was a US mission, Clinton used the UN as a scapegoat (Barnett 2002: 39). The effects this event had were later dubbed "the shadow of Somalia" (Barnett 2002: 21).

[2] For a discussion on who the major actors were see Caplan 2004; Des Forges 1999: 175; OAU 2000: 78.

[3] Interahamwe were militias mainly responsible for the killings during the 1994 genocide.

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