

Media Minefield? Genocide, Peacekeeping, Failures in Rwanda

Written by Tanushree Rao

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TANUSHREE RAO, JUL 31 2013

Introduction

Few have tried to justify the 800,000 deaths that took place in Rwanda in 1994. Even the sheer numbers alone are a clear indicator of the horrific crimes against humanity that took place. This is even before one considers the brutality and inhumanity through which almost a million bodies were ripped open and skulls cracked open by blunt machetes. Moreover, this is before accounting for the variety of factors involved in the genocide that made the event a particularly shocking incident in human history. The complete lack of regard for affairs in Rwanda on the parts of the vast majority of the world had led to many world leaders and scholars revisiting decisions made during the genocide and reflecting on how a sheer lack of will resulted in such mass catastrophe. Citing the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the international governments' interests, the majority of debate has centred on how the international community failed to stop the genocide based on its lack of political will.

This essay seeks to analyse how the international community failed to prevent and stop the genocide in Rwanda. While it acknowledges the importance of political will, the lack of which was a major cause of failure in Rwanda, it argues there is a step prior to this that created and prolonged the lack of will. The focus is, therefore, on an element that underpinned diminished international political will: public information. The international media was a major factor that prevented public opinion from reaching a stage where political will could be developed towards a greater chance of a positive response to the crisis. Prior to the genocide, the international public had limited knowledge on the situation unfolding, and challenges to peacekeepers in Somalia and Bosnia meant that the public had developed mediocre perceptions of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping. During the genocide, public information barely improved. The majority of journalists fled Rwanda once the situation began its downward spiral, with few remaining to tell the story.

This essay first introduces the Rwandan genocide and peacekeeping. The second section focuses on the nature of international public information during the Rwandan crisis and the lack of information that was provided to the public before and during the genocide. The third and final section is centred on public perceptions of peacekeeping and how this was a challenge not only for political will, but for the success of the peacekeeping mission in Rwanda.

In discussing and analysing public information in this essay, this essay refers not to the information provided by the peacekeeping forces to the UN prior to and during the genocide, nor the propaganda disseminated domestically in Rwanda to incite hatred and mobilize people to kill. While these were both important aspects in the genocide, the former is much more related to logistics and coordination than public information, and the latter does not explain the lack of political will to prevent and stop the genocide. This essay refers to public information as information that would be communicated to the international public and translated into political will.

Setting the Scene: The Rwandan Genocide and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda

After the Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana's plane was shot down over the Rwandan capital, Kigali, genocide began. Three years in the making, the genocide was a product of ethnic tensions between the Hutu and the

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Tutsi that had been developing since German and Belgian colonial rule in the early 20th century (Hintjens 1999: 253; James 2008: 92; Kuperman 2001: 6; Magnarella 2005: 808; Raymont 2006; Wittman 2008: 1). As tensions escalated, elaborate plans were developed by the Interahamwe, an extremist Hutu group, to exterminate the Tutsi race in a violent, prolonged episode of ethnic cleansing. Despite such warnings since the early 1990s, when smaller genocidal acts began to take place (Murigande 2008: 5), the situation and information provided was not regarded by the international community as an appropriate reason to act. Rather, by denying the occurrence of genocide, the international community ignored warning signs and avoided the moral calling of an active response.

Some measures, while institutionally and practically weak, had been put in place by the United Nations in order to maintain relative levels of order and security. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) was set up in 1993, based on the Arusha Accords of August that year (Bellamy and Williams 2010: 202). UNAMIR was created to observe compliance of a power-sharing agreement between President Habyarimana and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF); yet the radical agendas of the President's Hutu opponents meant that circumstances would unveil that were out of the control of UNAMIR. With a weak mandate and far less than adequate resources, UNAMIR was unable to make a significant improvement in the Rwandan situation and was left powerless.

However, UNAMIR was in a prime position to observe early warning signs and communicate this to the UN. In a bid to help restore security to the hostile situation before it escalated into genocide, UNAMIR Commander-in-Chief Romeo Dallaire sent a cable to the UN on January 11, 1994 containing information on the plans of the Interahamwe to conduct a mass killing of Tutsi in Rwanda (Kuperman 2001: 89; Murigande 2008: 5; Raymont 2006; Uvin 2001: 88). Because the UN remained uncommitted, UNAMIR remained underfunded and unable to oversee any potential peace settlement (Bellamy and Williams 2010: 203; Clapham 1998: 206). Similarly, to prevent and stop the genocide of 800,000 Rwandans, the international community remained disinterested in the situation and failed to see any benefit in eliciting a strong response.

The Genocide and Public Information: Why International Political Will Never Emerged

If a lack of commitment were to characterise the UN's political response, the same can be said for the international media's reporting on the genocide and the UN's dissemination of information to the international public. While several scholars assessing the role of the media in Rwanda attribute hate media within Rwanda as a major cause of the genocide (James 2008; Melvern 2000: 155; Wittman 2008), the international media and reports of the situation, or lack thereof, had their own significance and role in the international community's failure to prevent and stop the genocide.

The international media had little interest in Rwanda. With conflict occurring in Bosnia at the same time, much of the media's reporting was centred on European conflict, which was far more satisfying for international public interest than the Rwandan genocide (Chaon 2007: 162). Little effort was put into ensuring journalists were able to properly cover the genocide, particularly given the dangers of media personnel in Rwanda. The security situation in Rwanda led journalists to leave Rwanda upon worsening of the situation, most significantly by mid-April when the killings began (Chaon 2007: 162; Melvern 2001: 91). Many who worked for media organisations were pulled out, with the exception of few journalists from Radio France Internationale, the BBC, the AFP, and a small number of others (Chaon 2007: 162). By this point, stories in the international news media had turned to the evacuation of personnel from Rwanda rather than the genocide unfolding. Attention was diverted from the increasing severity of the situation and the need for prompt action on the part of the international community.

Of the journalists who did remain, some attempted to provide holistic accounts of what was truly happening. A notable effort was by Nick Hughes, a BBC journalist who captured a killing on video, one of the only times this happened to the media during the Rwandan genocide (Thompson 2009: 247). This video was immediately shipped to Nairobi via a stranger boarding an aircraft and uploaded to London once received, before being distributed to media organisations such as CNN, the ABC, and ZDF. Unfortunately, the flashing of a single video across television screens made little difference. This was not reflective of a comprehensive, international media effort to expose the atrocities of Rwanda. This video was merely one of the very few images that the international public received during the genocide. In the grand scheme of media representation of the genocide, audiences were left highly uninformed

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and deprived of images and stories that would provide the grounds for will to respond (Schimmel 2011: 1126).

Furthermore, stories provided by remaining journalists in Rwanda were challenged by international news outlets which believed them to be one-sided and unbalanced. In reality, this was the truth of what was occurring: a large Hutu group was massacring the Tutsi population. However, media organisations made attempts to “balance” the story through amplifying incidents such as RPF soldiers killing five churchmen (Doyle 2007: 155; Schimmel 2011: 1132). This legitimated the dismissal of the genocide as conflict where parties were equivalently violent and hostile to each other. In fact, this essentially painted a picture of tribal warfare, which was the perception much of the international public had developed following media reports that framed the genocide as a simple conflict between warring tribes in Africa, unworthy of international attention to cease the violence (Hintjens 1999: 274; Melvern 2001: 92; Sarkin and Fowler 2010: 65; Schimmel 2011: 1127; Thompson 2009: 249).

Domestically, the government’s official stance and reporting policy were that killings were caused by clashes between the RPF and the Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR). This was within a broader strategy of state propaganda that aimed to irk the Hutu population and develop hostilities towards Tutsi neighbours and relatives (Hintjens 1999: 248). Internationally, inaccurate portrayals of the genocide as tribal warfare led to a significantly lesser-perceived importance of the genocide in the minds of much of the public (Melvern 2001: 92). With much of the international news media censored, in order to deny what was occurring, so as to avoid morally invoking a need to respond, the term “genocide” was avoided (Kuperman 2001: 23). Such failure to honestly report the situation in Rwanda led to public ignorance in media audiences, who did not receive adequate information to formulate an informed opinion on the situation (Schimmel 2011: 1126).

Denial in the media was also particularly problematic, as it had dire implications for political response. United States officials relied on international news media coverage, and yet with a censored and uninformed account of what was happening, little action was taken (Kuperman 2001: 23). Barely any credibility was derived from official sources of information such as Dallaire’s cable on January 11, which indicated that genocide was occurring and that a response was necessary to prevent and stop it. The media never mobilised will to respond; instead, it left audiences disinterested and disengaged.

Peacekeeping after Somalia: The Scarcity of Support among the Media and the Public

During and prior to the genocide, public information was poor, and it did not lend support to the blue helmets. This was highly problematic in Rwanda, as international governments lost faith in peacekeeping operations after Somalia, making UNAMIR highly likely to fundamental problems with its functionality (Rose 1999: 136). The Somalia experience had a strong effect on the international community’s perceptions of peacekeeping, which inherently affected the public during the Rwanda crisis, at a time when political will was already low, given the lack of public information disseminated to media audiences around the world. This consequently resulted in minimal faith and thus minimal action to strengthen UNAMIR’s ability to prevent and stop the genocide.

This lack of faith following Somalia was complemented by news reports during Rwanda that formulated a strongly negative image of UNAMIR without completing the story (Holquin 1998: 640). The media covered UNAMIR’s inability to prevent or stop the genocide, but did not explain why; little was known about the limitations put in place by the UN, and the lack of training and resources provided for the mission. Consequently, an opportunity to educate the public on factors limiting success for UNAMIR was discarded by the media. This misinformation, much like the misinformation on the details of the genocide, led to a failed opportunity to develop the will to respond among the international public. The necessity of formulating a response to misinformation and anti-UN propaganda is also fundamental to effective peacekeeping operations, benefiting peacekeepers on the field by enhancing public support, and ameliorating public perceptions of peacekeeping (Lee 1997: 161; Holquin 1998: 641). In Rwanda, this never happened. If it had, it would have enhanced public will and pushed the UN to pursue a more adequate response to the genocide.

Despite this positive information being an aspect of the UN’s administrative function, minimal efforts by the UN to frame certain public information did not give it any advantage. UNAMIR’s potential pull-out of Rwanda during the

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escalation of the crisis also sent a highly negative signal to public opinion (Melvern 2000: 153). With an existing negative perceptions due to failures in Somalia, the UN missed the crucial importance of maintaining positive public information that did not see international public opinion spiral into one characterised by a lack of support for peacekeeping operations. However, the UN's strategy was questionable, and no notable effort was made to justify or counter such information. For this reason, after having analysed failures in instances such as Rwanda, it is now recognised that a more dynamic, effective approach to information policy is required when peacekeeping operations take place during high-intensity conflicts (Rose 1999: 145). Such an approach has a greater chance of leading to a genuine response.

In this instance, however, approaches to information policy were vague. United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meetings took place behind closed doors (Melvern 2000: 152), leaving the vast majority of people unaware about the decision-making process and the needs of the peacekeeping force to prevent and stop the genocide. This lack of transparency meant that the media was unable to act as a public forum for debate, as information was not transmitted past the UNSC's doors. While being able to have uncensored reporting and access to information is often presented as a major interest of the media, particularly during peacekeeping operations (Lee 1997: 162), little effort was made to obtain the information during the Rwanda crisis. The public was uninformed of the decisions that took place regarding UNAMIR and were left only with their perceptions of an inadequate, ill-equipped force that was unable to carry out the prevention and stoppage of the Rwandan genocide. Perceptions that had a chance of enhancing political will, likely to be derived from greater knowledge on limitations and opportunities for the force, could not be developed when the media was excluded from UNSC deliberations and when the details of the peacekeeping force prevented from reaching the international public. Again, an opportunity to effectively educate the public and thus positively shape public opinion was rejected while appropriate measures were never taken by the international community to prevent and stop the genocide.

Conclusion

The media's role in contributing to the international community's lack of political will was a major reason why the international community failed to prevent and stop the Rwandan genocide. From the failure of media to committedly report on Rwanda to the negative perceptions of peacekeeping that stemmed from media reports on Somalia in the early 1990s, the international media was a major obstacle to the development of international interest in prompting a response to the genocide. Both the UN and the international public were highly uninterested in the situation, despite the severity and horror of 800,000 brutal deaths in just 100 days. Public information failed on the part of both the UN and international media outlets, with few journalists remaining in Rwanda given the dangers of the security situation and the lack of public interest in the story. Consequently, with little information reaching the public, international public opinion never reached the point of political will for the international community to prevent and stop the genocide. Furthermore, faith in peacekeeping operations was minimal, resulting in a lack of public support for developing UNAMIR into a force that had the capacity to manage such a situation and foster a more favourable security situation. With better public information from the UN and from the international news media, Rwanda may have had a very different story and one with a happy ending.

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