

April 6: the Peace Agreement explodes and the genocide is unleashed

At the beginning of April there had been some hope that the peace process would move forward, with President Habyarimana flying off to Dar es Salaam to discuss the process. On the evening of April 6, the plane carrying Habyarimana and members of his armed forces was shot down over Kigali and all were killed. Hutu extremists used this as the signal to launch genocide against Tutsis and politically moderate Hutus.

The entire administrative mechanism governing Rwanda was used to deliver a meticulously planned extermination of Tutsis, and all Hutus were implored and equipped to do their share. The presence of UN peacekeepers was used as a rallying point for the genocide as evidence of continued Western interference, and the peacekeepers became a convenient target upon which blame for the death of the president could be laid. In the first 24 hours, ten Belgian peacekeepers had been killed.

The UN retreat

The death of peacekeepers so early into this conflict was an ominous sign for members of the UN Security Council, who were still scarred by the recent loss of life in Somalia in what was supposed to be a simple humanitarian mission. In particular, Somalia marked a dramatic turning point in the US administration's perspective toward peacekeeping operations as they watched television images of dead American soldiers being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu.

From this disaster emerged Presidential Decision Directive No. 25 (PDD-25), in which President Clinton outlined limitations on future US involvement with the UN unless strict conditions were met. Primary among these was that future participation in peace operations would be limited to those cases that directly advanced US interests. Belgium, as had been predicted by Hutu extremists earlier on, was insistent on an immediate withdrawal of its forces from Rwanda, but did not want to be seen as acting independently. It found an ally in the United States, who moved for a withdrawal of all peacekeepers.⁹

On April 21, a meeting of the Security Council was convened and Resolution 912 was passed, which reduced the number of UN troops to a token force of 270 peacekeepers. In an unintended ironic turn of phrase, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright described the reduced force as enough "to show the will of the international community."¹⁰

9 Melvern 2000: 163.

10 Quoted in Allen 2006.

Dallaire, who had been surprised many times by the inefficiencies, caution, and politics of the UN, was not prepared for the withdrawal of most of his troops in the face of rampant killings. He had "expected the ex-colonial white countries to stick it out even if they took casualties."¹¹ Later he would summarize the situation thus:

Ultimately, led by the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, [the UN Security Council] aided and abetted genocide in Rwanda. No amount of its cash and aid will ever wash its hands of Rwandan blood.¹²

A question of genocide

One of the things that allowed the Security Council to withdraw most of its troops was the characterization of the bloodshed as civil war or, worse, "tribal war." The US Ambassador to Rwanda, for example, waited almost a month into the genocide before declaring a "state of disaster," but then minimized the problem by characterizing it as "tribal killings."¹³ Eventually, under some pressure to respond to the scale of the killings, the US State Department spoke of "acts of genocide." When asked how many "acts of genocide" it took to make "genocide," a spokesperson for the US State Department responded: "That's just not a question that I'm in a position to answer."¹⁴

Dallaire made constant attempts to get the UN to characterize the killings as genocide, knowing that this would require it to act more decisively. Defined as "a criminal act, with the intention of destroying an ethnic, national, or religious group,"¹⁵ the UN—under its 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide—has an obligation to respond where genocide is acknowledged to be occurring. Article VIII of this treaty states:

Any Contracting Party may call upon the competent organs of the United Nations to take such action under the Charter of the United Nations as they consider appropriate for the prevention and suppression of acts of genocide . . .¹⁶

11 Quoted in Power 2002: 367.

12 Dallaire 2003: 323.

13 Allen 2006.

14 Quoted in Power 2002: 364.

15 Destexhe 1995: 5.

16 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/p_genoc1.htm).

Not only does the word "genocide," first coined to describe Hitler's designs for the extermination of Jews, carry a legal obligation, it further has been imbued with moral judgement.

By defining events as "tribal killings," "civil war," or even "acts of genocide," the UN was able to defer taking more decisive action. As Dallaire and his remaining troops did what they could to protect people, the distinction between a civil war and genocide became critical in the events in Rwanda in 1994. Had the attacks on Tutsis been labelled as genocide, it would have triggered the machinery of the United Nations to take firm and decisive action to prevent it. However, the UN was slow to act and has since been criticized for the time it took it to actually label the events in Rwanda as genocide, waiting until June 28, 1994 to make the initial declaration and until July for a panel of experts within the UN to confirm it was indeed genocide. The UN was finally satisfied that the events that were going on in Rwanda met the criteria established under the 1948 Convention, by which time 800,000 people had already been murdered. As some commentators have noted:

For an event that was so widely covered by the media, the genocide in Rwanda largely remains misunderstood by the international community.¹⁷

As international awareness of the genocide grew, the member states of the UN could no longer simply ignore the situation in Rwanda. UN Resolution 919, authorized well into the genocide, sought to establish an expanded UNAMIR II humanitarian mission to help protect the population. The chair of the Security Council, however, admitted that the expansion was a fiction, as the resolution had been gutted by the US which was intent on successfully brokering a ceasefire before peacekeeping troops were committed. Even then, the continued characterization of the conflict in Rwanda as a civil war between two feuding parties, and not genocide, contributed to the weakness of the Security Council. Moreover, the fact that the US worked actively and effectively against an effective UNAMIR was one of the most significant failures, far exceeding the failings of the UN itself.

The aftermath: globalization, leadership, organizational failure, and post-colonial values

The tragic events in Rwanda in 1994 could easily be seen as something well beyond the reach of organizational analysis, well beyond the apparently mundane analysis of organizational processes and structures. Yet the genocide itself

¹⁷ Berry and Berry 1999: 4.