

The Rwandan Genocide: Memory Is Not Enough

With Stephen Ellis, 8 April 2004

This week ten years ago the Rwanda slaughter began. In just three months, between April and June 1994, while the world stood by and watched, nearly 800 000 Tutsis and tens of thousands of Hutus opposed to the government were exterminated in a genocide carried out by soldiers from the Rwandan Armed Forces (RAF) and the 'Interhamwe' militia, the operation organized by the political, military and administrative wings of the regime of Juvénal Habyarimana.

It's time this week to remember all this. And to say once more, as innumerable commentators will, 'never again'. But these are the same words we uttered after the Holocaust. And after the Cambodian genocide in the 1970s. And, barely a year later than Rwanda, after the genocidal massacre at Srebrenica. Each time such an atrocity happens, we look back wondering, with varying degrees of incomprehension, horror, anger and shame, how we could have let it all happen. And then we let it happen all over again.

Something more than memory is needed if another catastrophic genocide is not to happen, sooner or later somewhere in world. The agenda is not a short one, nor easy to deliver: but every element is crucial. We have to pay constant attention to high-risk situations; do everything possible to heal the wounds of in societies already torn apart; reach agreement in advance on the principles that should govern intervention in the future; have the political commitment to act if circumstances cry out for it; and have available the necessary resources to make that commitment effective.

The need for vigilance is nowhere greater than in Africa, where a genocidal ideology is far from dead, particularly in Central Africa. It is still propagated in the Congo, notably in the district of Ituri, where the Hema and Lendu communities for the last three years have engaged in a disastrous mutual extermination reminiscent of Rwanda. Comparable bouts of ethnic cleansing have disfigured Congo-Brazzaville, and the disease seems to be catching further afield, not least in Sudan, with the ugly attacks in Darfur, and in Cote d'Ivoire, where the situation has deteriorated alarmingly in the last month.

The 1994 Rwandan genocide was not the first in the Great Lakes region. Twenty-two years earlier, from April to August 1972, more than 200 000 Hutus in Burundi, including just about anyone with a secondary education, were exterminated by an army composed overwhelmingly of Tutsis, following a failed insurrection. These events are today largely forgotten by the outside world, but they mark the start of an era of selective genocide. And they remind us that the genocidal spirit is neither the prerogative of rural Hutus, who constitute 85 per cent of the populations of Rwanda and Burundi, nor are they a phenomenon isolated in time and place, unlikely to be reproduced in the neighbouring Congo or in other African countries.

One of the reasons that the fear of mutual extermination has remained so strong in the region is the belief that not only will the international community not care enough to intervene to stop genocidal killing, but nor will it support effective remedial efforts after the event. African regimes that are friends of Western countries have continued to enjoy impunity. The lack of apparent concern for crimes committed between 1994 and 1996 in Rwanda, between 1996 and 1998 in Congo, and between 1993 and 2003 in Burundi, has not helped to dispel the ideology that makes the extermination of others the condition for self-survival.

One cannot realistically expect the victors in bloody civil wars to judge themselves, but as long as the neo-traditional justice policy of "gacaca" in Rwanda, or the processes of the International Criminal Tribunal process of Arusha remain one-sided, giving all the appearance of victor's justice, the Rwandan reconciliation will remain dangerously incomplete. In Burundi, as long as an accounting for crimes committed since independence is no part of the transition, the prospect of seeing the criminals elected and taken back into power will continue to generate rebellion.

Looking to the future, the first need is for the international community to be better prepared to deal with these situations as they reach explosion point. Part of the answer is to get past the mindset, understandably common in a world where so many had to fight so hard to escape from colonialism, that resists any kind of intervention in a State's internal affairs. But state sovereignty is not a license to kill. It carries with it the responsibility to protect one's own people. And when that responsibility is willfully abdicated, or is beyond the capacity of the state to exercise, it yields to the wider responsibility of the international community.

The threshold for military intervention must also be high: large-scale loss of life, actual or apprehended, or large scale ethnic cleansing, actual or apprehended, pursued by forced in expulsion or other means. And it must always be carried out in a principled way, having regard always to prudential criteria of right intention, last resort, proportional means and reasonable prospect of the benefit of an intervention clearly outweighing its harm.

To focus the 'humanitarian intervention' debate on the 'right to intervene' is to guarantee continuing controversy about whether there can ever be such a right: to shift the perspective to that of the victim, and argue for a 'responsibility to protect', is to create the possibility for genuine consensus. That may prove to be the most enduring contribution of the Canadian-government sponsored International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, whose 2001 report, *The Responsibility to Protect*, has been quietly but steadily gaining momentum.

The critical question remains, nonetheless, whether there will be sufficient political commitment to act if -- or more likely when - the world is faced with another Rwanda. While pessimists say that nothing has fundamentally changed, and policy makers will always find reasons to avoid doing what they don't want to do, optimists say there is so much early warning and campaign capacity now around -- not least with the emergence to prominence of organizations like the International Crisis Group -- that it is unthinkable that conscience-shocking neglect could again prevail on this scale.

But even optimists, as we both are, have to contend with the reality that there is a lamentable lack of international military capacity presently available to deploy in these situations. Secretary

General Kofi Annan has worked hard to reform the way the UN does peacekeeping, adding headquarters capacity, setting up standby arrangements to speed deployment, and working to ensure adequate troops are deployed. Yet, member states are not doing their part. The disasters of peacekeeping in the 1990s taught the UN it could not fight a war or do enforcement operations; only capable states, or coalitions of capable states can do so. As Africa lacks such a force, enforcement actions now fall to the U.S. and Europe, as occurred when the UK sent troops to Sierra Leone, the French did so in Ivory Coast, and the US reluctantly sent a small contingent to Liberia.

There are some signs of progress. For instance, when the UN's mission in the Congo faced massacres in the eastern town of Ituri in May 2003, France took the lead in an international response by organizing 'Operation Artemis'. This intervention secured the town and the airport in Bunia for three months, waiting for the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force. Supported logistically by other EU countries, the Operation Artemis force almost certainly prevented a genocide in Ituri. It also proved that a successful external intervention was possible outside the defense structures of NATO, through the putting in place of the operational structures of a common defense and common security policy.

Since then, however, the psychological and political benefits of this operation have been undercut by the lack of capacity of the UN mission which, despite its combat helicopters and its three well armed infantry battalions, is incapable of facing repeated attacks by Ituri militia, even less to disarm them. Although 150 000 troops can be found for Iraq, and to maintain a presence of 10 000 in Bosnia nine years after the ceasefire there, it seems beyond the resources of the whole international community to put more than 10 000 troops into a Congo the size of continental Europe.

The dilemma of peace enforcement operations in sub-Saharan Africa -- where the major Western powers generally have the capacity but rarely the will, and the converse is the case within the region -- can only be resolved by a serious international effort to build highly trained, readily deployable local capacity. The EU made a big start in this respect by pledging \$300 million in February to build five regional brigades (of 2000-3000 troops each), with country battalions led by multinational headquarters: to be ready for traditional ceasefire-monitoring type peacekeeping by 2005, and more complex peace enforcement operations by 2010.

But 2010 is a long time to wait for a capacity that could be needed. It would help enormously if this program could be accelerated, in particular by a significant contribution by the US -- which is presently contributing to a similar program it initiated in 1996 around \$15 million (out of a defence budget of some \$400 billion).

A lot of countries have Rwanda on their consciences. The way to erase the stain is not through memorial services, but effective action.