

# WHAT HAS THE UN LEARNT FROM RWANDA?

It was undoubtedly one of the greatest failures in the history of UN peacekeeping and, 20 years on, the shame of its retreat in the face of machete-wielding mass killers continues to dog the UN. But how much have things changed in the years since? The answer, the author argues, may be found in the mountains of South Kordofan and the cities of Central African Republic.

Soldiers from the United Nations force in the Democratic Republic of Congo, MONUC, on patrol in April 2010 [Getty Images]



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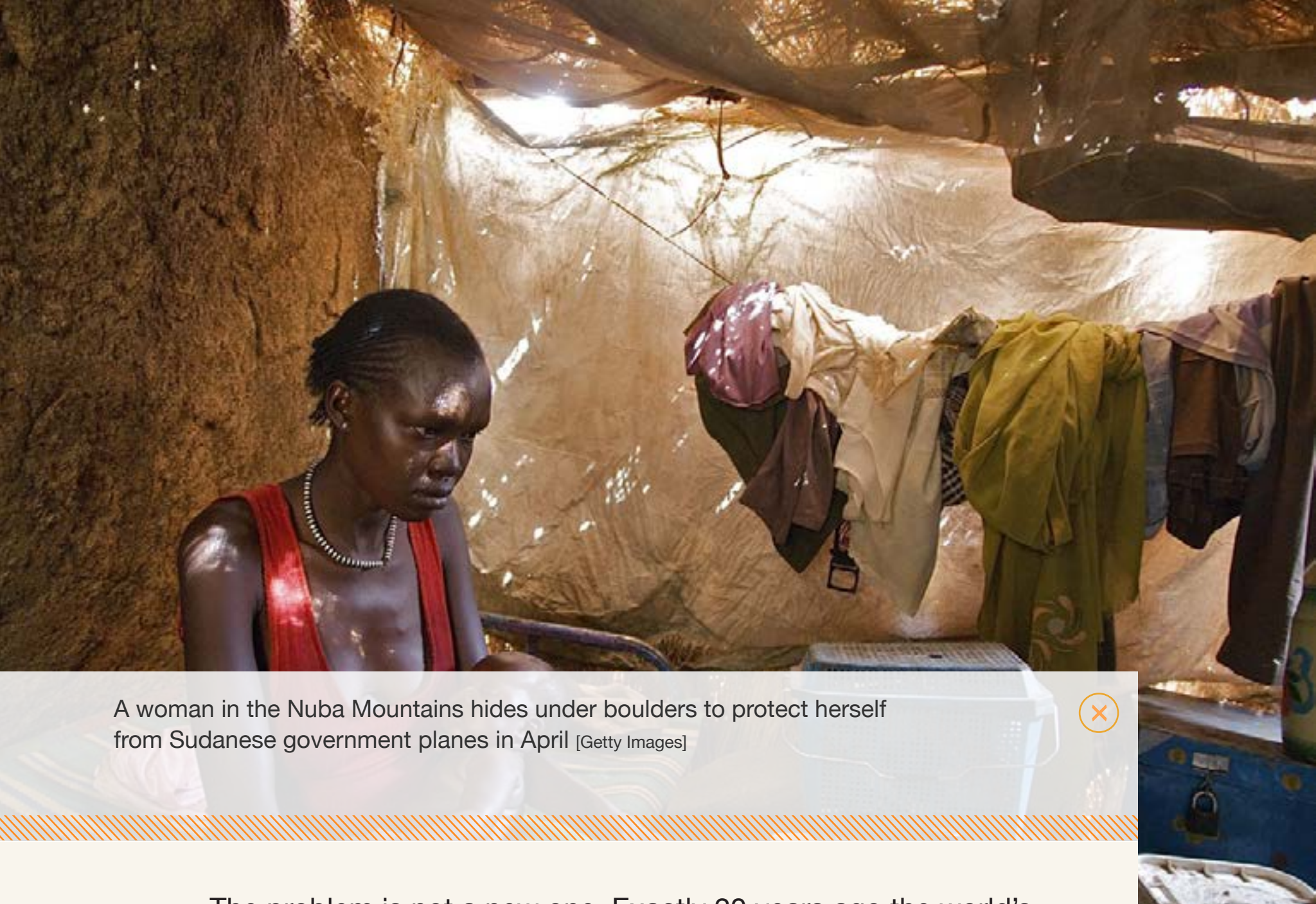
In the Nuba Mountains if the bombs of the Sudanese Airforce don't kill you, dirty water and disease will. At the moment there are an estimated 300,000 civilians taking refuge in the mountains who have fled villages in South Kordofan where indiscriminate bombing, extra-judicial killing, rape and pillage are rife. No one knows how many thousands have died. But it is a certainty that more will perish as the rainy season comes, food sources diminish and the armed conflict continues.

The Nuba Mountains are a mystery to most people. Western journalists and aid workers are barred entry to South Kordofan. So like Darfur before it, the killing and starvation takes place without us having to watch distressing scenes on our television screens. These are hidden deaths of a mostly forgotten people.

Our world suffers from atrocity attention deficit disorder, unable to focus upon more than one international catastrophe at a time. For the last three years Syria has dominated the media, haunted our living rooms and plagued our consciences. Stopping crimes against humanity in Syria should be a global priority, but at the United Nations in New York it has become increasingly difficult to meaningfully discuss the conflict in South Kordofan, the plight of persecuted Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, or other neglected cases.







A woman in the Nuba Mountains hides under boulders to protect herself from Sudanese government planes in April [Getty Images]



The problem is not a new one. Exactly 20 years ago the world's media was focused on one of the biggest news stories of the decade. Nelson Mandela was days away from being elected president of a free South Africa. Literally hundreds of journalists and television crews descended upon Johannesburg. And while their cameras were focused on the final symbolic death of apartheid, few reported on the actual death of President Juvénal Habyarimana of Rwanda when his jet was shot down on the night of April 6, 1994.

The genocide against the Tutsi began just hours later. Over the following 100 days almost a million human beings were systematically murdered. The killers manned roadblocks and did their work mainly with machetes, hand grenades and home-made clubs. This was a sickeningly efficient genocide carried out in a remote corner of Africa.



The world barely bothered to tune-in, let alone to do anything to stop the killing. Approximately 2,500 reporters covered Nelson Mandela's inauguration as South Africa's president. Throughout the genocide the foreign media contingent in Rwanda never grew to more than 15 people.

Crucially, there was no determination at the UN in New York to forcibly halt the genocide. Instead, as the killing intensified, the small peacekeeping force in Rwanda, UNAMIR, commanded by the indomitable Romeo Dallaire, had its resources depleted and its best troops withdrawn. The UN Security Council, which should have confronted the genocidal regime, chose instead to provide weak excuses for inaction and retreat.

The Rwandan genocide ended in July 1994 not because of an international intervention to protect people from machete-wielding killers, but because a rebel army led by now-President Paul Kagame marched into Kigali and overthrew the 'Hutu Power' regime.

Having presided over two of the greatest failures in the history of UN peacekeeping - Rwanda in 1994 and the fall of the Srebrenica 'safe haven' in 1995 - Kofi Annan desired to make amends after he became UN secretary-general in 1997. So at the start of the new millennium, Annan posed an awkward question. "If humanitarian intervention is, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty," he asked the UN, "how should we respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica, to gross and systematic violations of human rights that offend every precept of our common humanity?"





Rwandan Patriotic Front soldiers investigate the site of the plane crash that killed President Juvenal Habyarimana, whose death on April 6, 1994, triggered the Rwandan genocide [Getty Images]



Annan's answer came in the form of the political principle of the Responsibility to Protect (or R2P), unanimously adopted at the UN's World Summit in 2005. The basis of R2P is that all humans have a right to be protected from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. That responsibility falls, first and foremost, upon their sovereign government. However, if that government proves unable or unwilling to exercise its responsibilities, the international community is obliged to act.

In 1994 a feeble UN response had created an enabling environment for the Rwandan *génocidaires*. A lot has changed since then. While the shame of the past can't be expunged, within the UN the debate now is about how R2P should be meaningfully implemented in specific cases, not whether such a responsibility exists.



Conflict prevention is at the heart of R2P but most public debate has been focused on those extreme cases where atrocities are already occurring, the perpetrators won't back down, and it becomes imperative for the UN Security Council to authorise coercive force. In the midst of the controversial 2011 Libyan intervention, President Kagame of Rwanda wrote that: "Our responsibility to protect is unquestionable – this is the right thing to do; and this view is backed with the authority of having witnessed and suffered the terrible consequences of international inaction."

In the five years prior to the Libya intervention in March 2011 the Security Council had passed only four resolutions which referenced R2P. By contrast, in the three years since the resolution authorising the civilian protection operation in Libya, the Security Council has passed 15 resolutions that directly reference R2P. One of these concerned the trade of small and light weapons, while the others confronted the threat of mass atrocities in Cote d'Ivoire, Libya, Mali, Sudan, South Sudan and Central African Republic.

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As the world's attention was focused on South Africa's transition to democracy, few seemed to notice the genocide raging in Rwanda [Getty Images]

Nine out of 16 current UN peacekeeping operations have an explicit protection of civilians mandate. Although blue helmets have in the past been accused of looking away as mass killers go about their business, there is a greater willingness to confront those who prey upon vulnerable civilian populations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and elsewhere.

That's not to say there aren't still moments of inconsistency and shame. In 2009 during the final stage of the bitter civil war in Sri Lanka, government forces were responsible for war crimes that may have killed up to 40,000 civilians. The UN again remained silent and compliant.

Similarly, in the Sudanese states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile armed conflict between rebels and the government began in June 2011 and has resulted in more than three years of war crimes and crimes against humanity. In response the UN Security Council has passed five resolutions calling upon both sides, but especially the Khartoum government, to permit humanitarian access and to negotiate an end to the conflict. Sudan has ignored these resolutions and in the Nuba Mountains displaced civilians appear to have given up hope that the UN will ever do anything to help make the government accountable for its crimes.

Now compare and contrast the cases of South Sudan and Central African Republic.







The political principle of the Responsibility to Protect (or R2P) was unanimously adopted at the UN's World Summit in 2005

[Getty Images]



Almost three years ago on July 9, 2011 the world celebrated the official birth of the new nation of South Sudan. A flag was raised, people danced and even the most hardened sceptics admitted that after three decades of civil war, this was a historic achievement. South Sudan was immediately welcomed as the 193rd member of the United Nations. Which is not to say it was all backslapping. Cynics declared South Sudan to be a “pre-failed state,” and it was clear that without enduring international support it was going to be difficult to avoid the African post-independence curses of conflict, poverty and corruption.

Since then constant armed incursions have continued along the still unresolved border between Sudan and South Sudan and deadly inter-communal violence has killed thousands of people in Jonglei state. The fledgling nation has also been inundated with refugees from South Kordofan and Blue Nile, which remain part of Sudan. Faced with these problems the ruling party turned inwards, with political fractures also running along ethnic lines. Despite a large UN presence and the support of a constellation of international humanitarian organisations and charities, civil war broke out on December 15.



Meanwhile in neighbouring Central African Republic the March 2013 overthrow of a corrupt and venal government led to the collapse of the state and months of predatory rule by the predominately Muslim Séléka rebels. When this government was, in turn, forced out by anti-balaka (anti-machete) militias formed mainly among the Christian population, the country's descent into ethno-religious violence accelerated. Murderous mobs have "cleansed" the capital, Bangui, of 80 percent of its Muslim population. The arrival of French and African Union (AU) peacekeepers after December 5 has failed to stem the bloodletting. Terrifying machete killings still take place in broad daylight, without fear of sanction.

The UN Security Council has responded, invoking R2P, in both South Sudan and Central African Republic. But financial constraints, emotional investment and geo-politics have affected the nature, intensity and depth of the response.

In South Sudan the UN has played a crucial role in saving lives. Last December three peacekeepers were killed defending civilians as more than 75,000 people fled to UN bases for sanctuary. The Security Council quickly refocused the UN mission on civilian protection and expeditiously expanded its presence from 7,500 to almost 14,000 troops and police, with reinforcements air-lifted in from other missions in Africa.







A child sits in Benako refugee camp in Tanzania in May 1994. More than 300,000 mainly Hutu Rwandan refugees crossed into neighbouring Tanzania as the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front entered Rwanda in a bid to stop the genocide [Getty Images]



In neighbouring Central African Republic, meanwhile, the international NGO community was comparatively thin on the ground, no major foreign power displayed an interest, and if not for its name, most diplomats at the UN would have been unable to locate the country on a map. Major powers on the UN Security Council dragged their feet, saying that as a former colony, it was France's problem.

As the crisis intensified, the French - with UN approval - did finally militarily intervene in support of the AU mission in Central African Republic. Since December 5, three French soldiers and 21 members of the AU force have been killed. But unlike the Belgian peacekeepers who promptly withdrew from Rwanda after suffering terrible casualties at the start of the genocide in April 1994, the French and AU have stayed.



And yet, despite the UN special advisor, Adama Dieng, warning that the “seeds of genocide” were apparent in Central African Republic, a proper UN peacekeeping operation was not approved until early April and won’t be operational until mid-September. During the intervening five months, the French and AU force, bolstered somewhat by reinforcements from the European Union, will have to hold on. By September there might not be any Muslims left in Central African Republic to protect.

Twenty years after Rwanda, the lesson in both Central African Republic and South Sudan is that we still struggle to close the gap at the UN between pretty words and decisive action. But to paraphrase my colleague Tom Weiss, at least there is now “the double-standard of inconsistency”, whereas previously there had been only a single standard of inaction and indifference.

I was recently in Kigali for the the 20th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. At Amahoro stadium President Kagame presided over the country’s official commemoration. In a re-enactment of Rwanda’s history, a car full of khaki-clad whites drove into the stadium and started imposing racial science upon the native population. Tutsi and Hutu performers were identified and classified. Then, as people acted out the beginning of the genocide, the whites slipped off their colonial pith helmets, replaced them with blue UN berets and retreated, leaving the Rwandans behind to be slaughtered. This is how Rwanda will forever be remembered.







United Nations Chief of Staff Iqbal Riza and General Romero Dallaire in Kigali, Rwanda in May 1994 [Getty Images]



In his speech at Amahoro stadium, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that “the shame still clings, a generation after the events” of 1994. But he pointed to Central African Republic and South Sudan and argued that there would be an even greater shame in a failure to defend those who face mass atrocities today. He is right. But despite the secretary-general’s noble resolve, the people of the Nuba Mountains remain unprotected and still cower in rudimentary caves when the Sudanese bombers come.

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The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera’s editorial policy.