

Rwanda: The Role of the West in the Rwandan Genocide

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ANALYSIS

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By Emma Miller

"We heard a child cry out in the brush. We were furious because we thought it would bring the death squads. I thought to myself: Shut up child. Shut up or die. A policeman found him covered in blood but not wounded. Later, I looked at the boy. I hadn't been able to see him before because it was dark. It was my son."

The failure of the international community to intervene in this mass slaughter still represents a monumental failure of the 'civilised world'. Further, the Western media's stereotyped and simplistic reporting of Rwanda had a critical impact on decisions made at the time.

On April 6th 1994, triggered by the shooting down of Rwandan President Habyarimana's plane, a planned campaign of slaughter was unleashed by extremist Hutus, against members of the Tutsi ethnic group and moderate Hutus. Meanwhile, instead of acting to save lives, the UN Security Council drastically reduced the presence of UN troops.

After the killing started, the UN did propose to dispatch 5,500 troops to help stop the massacres. Pressure from the US and Britain meant that the deployment was delayed. They also argued - in the midst of genocide - that there had to be a ceasefire before troops could be deployed. Britain also sought to block the use of the word 'genocide' because under the 1948 UN Convention, this would have obliged states to 'prevent and punish' those responsible.

Within Rwanda, there were those who refused to take part in the orchestrated slaughter. Many Hutus who resisted, or intervened to save Tutsi lives, were butchered. While the Christian churches in Rwanda were all complicit to varying extents, Islam was the one exception. The imams called on Muslims to oppose the killing.

The international media played a contributory role. Critical political and economic factors, such as the interests of the West, were obscured in media coverage by a tendency to concentrate on ethnic identity as a cause of war. The conflict could then be presented as ignited by primitive causes beyond the influence or understanding of the West, fitting a "Heart of Darkness" portrayal of Africa.

Afterwards, a multinational evaluation of the genocide charged that since the Western media failed to report adequately, this 'possibly contributed to international indifference and inaction, and hence the crime itself.' Failure to report the complicity of prominent members of the international community (notably France, Egypt and South Africa) in arming and assisting the Habyarimana regime, contributed to an inappropriate international response that exacerbated the crisis.

There are positive signs of recovery in Rwanda, attributable to the country's people. The solidarity of Rwandan widows is impressive, as is their campaign for anti-retroviral drugs for women infected with HIV by rapes committed during the Genocide. There is the work of the local (Gacaca) courts system and the commitment of many Rwandans to reconciliation. For the first time since Rwanda was colonised, there is a government that does not promote concepts of ethnic superiority.

As with most conflict in Africa, these events cannot be fully understood without reference to international capital. Canadian Professor John McMurty explains that IMF policies had a critical role in destabilising Rwanda's economy before the genocide. From 1990, IMF interventions resulted in the collapse of earnings, triggering steep price increases in food and fuel and rapid increases of malaria and malnutrition. In 1992 IMF policies resulted in utility privatisations, and reduced public investment. The money disbursed to the Habyarimana government from new loans was used to purchase weaponry from France, and massively increase the army.

The massacre began shortly afterwards: "All was reported in the corporate media with no connection back to the IMF prescriptions which had step by step engendered the social pathology," notes McMurty.

Rwanda demonstrates the need to challenge the Western media's mechanistic interpretations of conflict in Africa. The role of international finance is critical, yet ignored. The IMF continues with its failed impoverishing policies in Rwanda, recently imposing water privatisation. Rwanda further highlights the limitations to our democratic system, in the manipulation of the UN by the powerful. Although Britain is culpable in preventing an international response to the genocide, those responsible have never been held to account. If the international day of reflection on Rwanda is to have any meaning, these democratic deficits have to be addressed.

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