

The International Context of the Rwandan Crisis

Samuel M. Woldu and Edmund Abaka

Introduction

Africa is beset by many socioeconomic and political problems. Kaplan (1994) points out that scarcity, crime, overpopulation, ethnic conflict, and disease are rapidly destroying the social fabric of our planet. It is apparent that Rwanda and other African countries are facing cataclysms of crime, violence, famine, political and economic instability, ethnic strife, and a declining resource base. Rwanda is currently experiencing ethnic clashes, scarcity of resources, and a wave of urban violence and crime. In Rwanda today, criminal anarchy and violence appear to be the more real and immediate dangers to the social fabric of the society.

The theory of multicausality explains the incidence and prevalence of civil war in Rwanda. The impact of German and Belgian colonial rule, the lethargic response of the United Nations, the complicity and duplicity of France, Belgium, Uganda, and Zaire in the postcolonial period, and the dictatorship of Habyarimana, contributed to the present crisis. It appears plausible that the dwindling power base and diminishing economic prosperity of the Tutsi during successive regimes led to increased tension and disharmony among different ethnic groups in the society.

Successive regimes trampled upon the rights of the people and forcibly centralized economic and political power, under the rule of politically dominant ethnic groups at different times in the history of Rwanda. As discord, tension, and class differentiation sharpened among the various nation-

alities, deprivation, marginalization, forcible centralization of power, domination, nepotism, favouritism, and ethnic cleavages became potent weapons in the hands of the ruling oligarchy. The policy of impoverishment, victimization, deprivation, depopulation, and marginalization of the Tutsi ensued. This led to the creation of the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) in 1987 by children of exiled Tutsi in neighbouring countries. In October 1990, the RPF invaded Rwanda from Uganda, but was repulsed by the Rwandan army with the support of French and Belgian soldiers. The immediate spark which fuelled the Rwandan genocide was the shooting down of the plane carrying Juvenal Habyarimana (Rwanda) and Cyprien Ntaryamira (Burundi) from Tanzania. The two leaders were returning home from the Arusha peace talks on that fateful day, April 6, 1994.

The United Nations Response

The United Nations was lethargic in its response toward the Rwandan crisis. An isolationist American policy on peacekeeping refuses to send US troops overseas under UN command. It also spurns the notion of peacekeeping unless US interests are being advanced. This has paralyzed the United Nations peacekeeping efforts in Rwanda. Additionally, most member states of the UN lack the will to intervene. Furthermore, the UN lacks a clear policy framework to guide intervention. Consequently, it did not deploy troops in the field quickly and this resulted in the escalation of the crisis and the massacre of thousands of Rwandese.

The failure of the world body in Rwanda was aptly summed up by Louise Frechette, the Canadian ambassador to the UN (Barthos 1994):

We have not determined what types of activity the UN should plan for,

along the continuum from preventive deployment through observation missions, classic peacekeeping involving interposition, and more assertive and risky forms of intervention.

The UN needs a set of principles and guidelines to guide decision making. With the world community horrified by the massacre in Rwanda, the UN action was characterized by confusion, apathy, indecision, and fear. The diplomatic role of the UN in the Rwandan crisis has been largely ineffective in resolving the crisis. For instance, between the outbreak of war and the death of President Habyarimana, no serious diplomatic initiatives were made with either the OAU or other regional leaders. Though fourteen African countries called for an end to the hostilities and announced a readiness to respond favourably to an appeal from the UN Secretary-General, the policy of shunting African organizations aside (for reasons best known to the UN) is an ineffective and foolhardy policy. It should be noted that ECOWAS' action in the Liberian civil war shows that with logistical support and help from the international community, African organizations can play significant roles in crisis intervention, mediation, and prevention on the continent.

Moreover, the practice of sending lightly-armed peacekeepers into conflict zones reflects a failure to depart from the classic peacekeeping model involving interposition. Troops sent into crises situations should be well-equipped, mobile, and be able to protect civilians. UN soldiers watched helplessly while machete-wielding gangs attacked civilians sheltered in churches, a fact which underscored the UN's reluctance to send peacekeepers to Rwanda, despite the carnage. More significantly, the UN voted to reduce its force in Rwanda from 2,500 to a

Samuel Merha Woldu, Ph.D., teaches psychology at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria and is currently a visiting research scholar at the Centre for Refugee Studies, York University.

Edmund Abaka is a doctoral candidate with the Department of History, York University.



mere 270. Incidentally, there are still about 18,000 UN troops in Somalia. In the words of Koffie Annan, the UN Under-Secretary-General (Thompson 1994):

After the experience in Somalia and some of the things we see on our screen in ex-Yugoslavia, some governments are worried about sending their troops into situations where they believe they will be at risk.

One important means to overcome the reluctance in contributing troops to the UN peacekeeping operations is through the creation of a UN permanent army, as recently suggested by the Canadian Foreign Minister, Andre Ouellette.

The French Connection

The role of France in the Rwandan crisis is controversial. French support for Rwanda dates back to the beginning of the Habyarimana regime. Therefore, the intervention during the Rwandan genocide seems premeditated and unilateral. It is important to note that the intervention occurred minutes after the Security Council had sanctioned the move.

French policy in Africa has been guided by political and economic interests, regional dominance, strategic considerations, and a desire to demonstrate reliability and dependability as an ally. France has a long record of military and diplomatic support for the Habyarimana regime. It trained his "tonton macoute-style" militia and sent in troops to buttress his regime when it was threatened by the RPF in October 1990 (Brittain 1994). French troops had supported the Rwandan Armed Forces between October 1990 and December 1993. In addition, France supplied the Rwandan armed forces with arms and ammunition ranging from field artillery pieces to Gazelle helicopters and Noratlas and Guerrier aircraft. They also passed on night vision binoculars to the Rwandan army (Isnard 1994). Furthermore, the French bank Credit Lyonnais provided a \$6 million guaranteed loan for an arms purchase from Egypt in March 1992 (Hilsum 1994).

Political observers see the French deployment of troops as a continuation of the Elysees old policies, designed to prevent the RPF from taking control of Rwanda and possible implications thereof for Zaire and other neighbouring countries. Thus, it is probable that a stable, educated, and democratic government in Rwanda might be a bad influence on democratic forces and processes in Zaire (Brittain 1994). Interestingly enough, at the time of the French deployment, African nations such as Zimbabwe, Ghana, Senegal, and Ethiopia (already with troops on the ground) had been condemned at the OAU Summit. The failure of the UN and, for that matter, Western nations, to provide logistical support made the project a nonstarter. The

preserve the current administration or an alternative to the RPF, which they had opposed since its inception. International relief agencies also viewed the French role with suspicion. For instance, Médecins sans Frontières, Oxfam, and the International Red Cross declined to cooperate with a French unit created to coordinate humanitarian relief, accusing the French of seeking to use aid missions to boost support for the intervention (Tran and McGreal 1994).

France also temporarily blocked the application of Rwandan refugees seeking asylum in France. Rwandese students in France who applied for residence status also met a wall of silence. However, this might be consistent with tough new immigration laws

The role of France in the Rwandan crisis is controversial. French support for Rwanda dates back to the beginning of the Habyarimana regime. Therefore, the intervention during the Rwandan genocide seems premeditated and unilateral. It is important to note that the intervention occurred minutes after the Security Council had sanctioned the move.

paradox of the French connection is that France repatriated French nationals in April 1994, approved the withdrawal of the 2,000 UN troops in Rwanda just as the massacres were taking place, and turned around to offer "humanitarian protection" (2,500 troops) to refugees at a time the RPF was poised to take over. French soldiers also transported busloads of Rwandan soldiers to Zaire (McGreal 1994). Was this an attempt by France to shore up one of Africa's corrupt regimes and gain international credibility? Or, was France trying to secure maximum points on the public relations scoreboard? Was it a matter of regional control or supremacy among the poorest and defenceless African nations?

In a radical shift of policy, the French mandate was later broadened to stop the RPF advance after the capture of Kigali and Butare. This makes the humanitarian argument a shaky one. Critics were indeed of the view that France was planning to divide Rwanda or use it as a "safe haven" to

designed to keep out foreigners, especially Africans, from coming to France legally (Gambia 1994). Under these circumstances, "Operation Turquoise" was received with suspicion by the RPF, other countries and organizations.

The reasons behind the genocide in Rwanda and the forced migration of over 2.7 million people have often been couched in terms of ethnic clashes and the repression of Tutsi by the Kigali regime. However, a careful analysis of the crisis shows that German and Belgian colonial policies, the activities of France and her allies, the failure to repatriate Rwandese refugees, the regionalism of Habyarimana and his ruling clique, and a political power tussle may have been some of the causes of the genocide. It is pertinent, in the Rwandan question, to note that the war was mainly political rather than ethnic. In the same vein, one does not transmit refugee status to children, grandchildren or great grandchildren.

While Rwandans were trying to reshape their history, Zaire, like France

and Belgium, had been trying to stifle it. In 1990, Mobutu Sese Seko (Zaire) ordered his crack Division Speciale Presidentielle to help Rwandan soldiers beat off the RPF attack. Even after the death of Habyarimana, Zairean soldiers used false identities to buy ammunition, antitank shells, rocket launchers, and helicopters for Rwanda's interim government (*Africa Confidential* 1994). Before the death of Habyarimana, Mobutu Sese Seko had always supported the Rwandan Army with weapons, munitions, and fuel from the Goma base. In addition, remnants of the battered Rwandan army were seen crossing into Zaire with self-propelled cannon, light armoured cars, and even helicopters. These units have not been disarmed by Zaire (Isnard 1994). Some of the troops were even allowed to get UN special camps near Bukavu across the border from the French protection zone in southwestern Rwanda. This may have implications for future reprisals, peace and stability in Rwanda and in the region generally.

The Rwandan crisis has been a tragedy of apocalyptic proportions. It is estimated that between one-half to one million people died in the atrocities committed in April, May, June and July 1994. It is said to be the world's worst refugee catastrophe so far.

The Responsibility of the International Community

Foreign governments are "punishing" Africa by keeping quiet and not taking appropriate actions to stop civil war, famine, human rights abuses, etc. This encourages widespread social injustice, poverty, human rights violations, and the continued marginalization of Africa and other developing countries. By so doing, the West is guilty of inaction. History will judge the West as being apathetic and opportunistic in upholding its own economic interests at the expense of the welfare, dignity, and human rights of the people.

Foreign governments and NGOs should both be involved in social justice issues in the countries where they operate. Western governments and the

large multilateral organizations have considerable political and economic clout; they should exercise such influence for the benefit of impoverished groups in developing countries. Consequently, undemocratic leadership cabals, ruthless military dictators, and life presidents should not only be condemned, but also given a realistic period of time to relinquish power and set in motion a process for achieving political pluralism and multi-party governance.

In cases where unresponsive governments have not modified their behaviour and policies toward their citizens and have not demonstrated a move toward democracy, it is the duty of the community of nations to impose severe political, diplomatic, and economic sanctions promptly and without exception. It is imperative to ostracize and expel such leaders from international bodies.

The wealth of iron-fisted autocrats and that of their families and cohorts should be seized and invested in people-centred development projects and basic infrastructure. This should be done under the supervision of international observers and progressive forces in the host country.

Bilateral aid should be granted only to countries with clean human rights records. Funds should be properly accounted for and judiciously spent. At the same time, donor agencies and countries need to reassess the kinds of projects they support. Money for huge white elephant projects that have little or no direct benefit to the ordinary citizen should be re-channelled to more viable people-centred projects (Woldu, S. M. and Murray, E. 1993; Woldu, 1992).

As we move toward a "New World Order," the role of the international community in enforcing social justice, accountability, democratization processes and human rights cannot be overemphasized. In Africa, the role France played in perpetuating injustice and blocking democratic processes in Zaire, Togo, Cameroun, Ivory Coast, Chad, Central African Republic, Algeria, and other francophone countries

leaves much to be desired. The double standards of Western governments tend to entrench dictatorial regimes in power. It is paradoxical that many of these countries do talk about human rights and democracy, yet continue to prop up and support repressive dictators. Foreign support for Habyarimana strengthened his hand in ruthlessly dealing with other ethnic groups in Rwanda. Only firm action against totalitarian tendencies, an international condemnation of human rights abuse, and an insistence on a just and equitable world order would diminish many of the problems which tend to polarize developing countries and cause migration flows. ■

References

- Africa Confidential*. August 1994. "Rwanda: Battling for reconciliation." Vol.35, No.2, p.2-4.
- Africa Confidential*. June, 1994. "Rwanda I: Mobutu's mediation. Rwanda II: Murder in the church." Vol.35, No.12, p. 8.
- Africa Confidential*. May, 1994. "Rwanda: A double agenda." Vol. 35, No. 10 P8
- Barthos, G. 1994. "Failure in Rwanda shows UN needs to regain its focus." *Toronto Star*, May 28, p.A2.
- Brittain, V. 1994. "French intervention will not help Rwanda." *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, July 3.
- Gambia, A. 1994. "France blocks refugees from Rwanda." *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, July 3.
- Hilsum, L. 1994. "Settling scores." *Africa Report*, May/June, pp.13-17.
- Isnard, J. 1994. "How France helped Hutu regime." *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, July 3, p.13.
- McGreal, C., Webster, P. et al. 1994. "French set to fight Rwandan rebels." *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, July 10.
- Thompson, A. 1994. "World holds back despite carnage." *Toronto Star*, May 2, p.A16.
- Tran, M. and McGreal, C. 1994. "Balladur plea to the U.N. over Rwanda." *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, July 17
- U.S. Committee for Refugees 1991. *Exile from Rwanda: Background to invasion*. Washington: American Council of Nationalities Service.
- Woldu, S.M. 1992. "Democratic transition in Africa: A case study of Ethiopia." In B. Carron, A. Gboyega, and E. Osaghae (eds.) *Democratic transition in Africa*. (pp 69-80). Ibadan: CRELU.
- Woldu, S. M. and Murray, E. 1993. *A new vision for NGOs in Africa*. Accra: CUSO. □