



POSITION PAPER

Failure to act: the Rwandan genocide and the International Community

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ANALYSIS

I. Introduction

Today, 24 years after hundreds of thousands of Rwandans were systematically slaughtered by their own countrymen, the genocide still casts its shadow over the country. Many of the bodies are yet to be found, a lot of the perpetrators remain at large and ethnic killings are not entirely a thing of the past (Pelz & Corbett, 2009). For the international Community, Rwanda is a painful reminder of the consequences of failing to act. Despite having a peace keeping force in the country, the UN and the main western powers did little to prevent such an atrocity. Many have called out the UNSC, and the countries involved, for looking the other way at the time of the events. On their defence, it has been argued that International Community received confusing signals until it was too late. This displaced the blame from decision makers to the Intelligence Community, where the mechanisms necessary to activate reaction are found.

This essay attempts to determine whether the inactivity of the international community can be attributed to a failure of intelligence. My thesis is that, in this case, there was sufficient and timely evidence, early warnings included, of genocidal killings taking place and if the international community did not intervene was not because the intelligence available was not compelling enough but rather because of a lack of political will. This is something that cannot be equated with an Intelligence failure under a reasonable definition of the term. To argue so, the essay will be structured in the following manner: In the first section the background of the conflict will be briefly explained. In the second section the case against Intelligence failure will be made, distinguishing between the reaction to the early warnings and the response to the ongoing genocide. On the basis of those findings, I will conclude in the third section. The essay will draw on the work of authors who have studied the genocide, focusing on the International Community. I will also rely on witness accounts from people involved on the ground and in decision making at the highest level. In addition, I will refer to the works of Betts and Dahl on the subject of Intelligence failure.

II. Background

Tensions between Hutus and Tutsis, the two main ethnicities in Rwanda, go back to the pre-colonial period and have led to violent conflict on several occasions but never in the scale of the Rwandan Genocide, which took place in the context of the civil war. The prequel of the genocide can be traced back to October 1990 when the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) made up mostly by members of the Tutsi diaspora who had been in exile since the 1959 Revolution, invaded the country from neighbouring Uganda. Fighting went on until August 1993 when a cease fire agreement, the Arusha accord, was reached between the RPF and the Hutu dominated government. As a result, UNAMIR, a UN mandated force, was sent to the country to oversee the peace process. However, on April 7, 1994 an airplane carrying Hutu president Habyarimana was shot down over Kigali under mysterious circumstances killing the president and all those on board. The downing of Habyarimana's plane, which remains unresolved to this day, ended the fragile cease fire. During the resuming of the hostilities, Hutu hardliners in the government and the military, started eliminating moderates in their own ranks and in the opposition, launching an ethnic cleansing campaign against Tutsis (Hintjens, 1999). Across the country Hutu militias were unleashed and civilians were instigated against their Tutsi neighbours leading to a massive wave of killing and looting that lasted around a hundred days and took the lives of around 70% of the total Tutsi population in Rwanda. (Verpoorten, 2005) The

killings went on until mid-July when the RPF, which had been pushing back the Rwandan army, gained control of most of the country.

The scale and the organized nature of the killings suggests they were not the result of “spontaneous action from below” but a rather carefully planned genocide, generated at the state level (Lemarchand, 2004). During the massacres, Hutu militias like the Interahamwe (associated with the ruling party, MRND), and the Impuzamugambi (associated with the more hard-line CRD) coordinated with the Gendarmerie and with civil servants (Newbury, 1995). The presidential guard and military forces killed accordingly with pre-established lists, which included moderate Hutus along with prominent Tutsis (Lemarchand, 2004). In addition to the chain of command, mass media like the Radio des Milles Colines, a privately-owned radio affiliated with Hutu hardliners in the government, broadcasted virulent propaganda and instructions for militiamen (Newbury 1995). The systematic killing, approximately 6 deaths per minute during a hundred days, was referred to by the perpetrators as “the job” and took a massive amount of manpower, sweeping through whole areas and setting up a network of road blocks across the country.

Prior to the genocide, Hutu extremists had made active preparations, setting up death squads, hit lists and signals for coordinating the beginning of the killings. (Adelman 1996) As early as 1993, Hutu militias were already stockpiling weapons of all kinds, training and organizing themselves for execution style killings, (Verwimp, 2006). All this evidences that, from the beginning, the massacres were part of a nationwide campaign aimed at derailing the Arusha accords (Adelman 1996) consolidating Hutu hardliners in power and eliminating all Tutsis on the basis of their ethnicity alone.

III. Intelligence failure?

An Intelligence failure can be defined as “either a failure of the intelligence community to produce the intelligence needed by decision makers, or a failure on the part of the decision makers to act on that intelligence appropriately” (Dahl, 2013) This is a broad definition that entrusts Intelligence officials not only with collection and analysis but also with the task of convincing policy makers of the importance of the issue. In the case of the Rwandan genocide, failure would mean either failing to produce accurate intelligence of the situation on the ground or failing to persuade policy makers to act accordingly with the seriousness of the situation.

As for the first, it can hardly be argued that the main actors of the international community, particularly the UN and the Security Council Permanent members, did not have Intelligence on the Genocide, early warnings included. In Rwanda violence against Tutsis and regime critiques was a matter of conventional wisdom and had been escalating consistently since 1990. Before the Genocide, there were two authoritative reports -One by the UN Commission on Human Rights and one by the IFHR- warning that mass killings that had taken place in 1991/1992, were genocidal in nature and involved the authorities (Adelman 1996). While some of the violence could be linked with the ongoing civil war, ethnically driven massacres continued after the ceasefire. UNAMIR reports revealed Hutu extremist's capabilities and intentions, which included an armed coup, attacks on UN forces and a full ethnic cleansing campaign in the capital (Dallaire, 2003). Similar reports were available to French and Belgium authorities who had a wide range of Intelligence sources in the country (Adelman 1996). As early as 1992, the Belgian Ambassador in Kigali had warned that a powerful segment of Hutu elites was "planning the extermination of the Tutsis of Rwanda..." In the same year a conference was hosted in the Belgian Senate in which Professor Filip Reyntjens alerted of the existence of Hutu death squads and death lists (Stanton, 2004). The French government was even better informed because of their involvement with the Habyarimana regime. Correspondence between French officials, using the word genocide on several occasions, proves there were serious concerns about Hutu hardliners and their intentions (Krosiak, 2007).

In the case of the British, who lacked a permanent embassy in Kigali, there is no evidence that they accessed these sources despite claims that they intercepted diplomatic correspondence (Melvern, 2006). However, they did receive a report from their non-resident ambassador who visited the country in February 1994, right before the genocide, and warned about the deteriorating situation. (White, 2016). Similarly, the US State and Defence Departments received cables informing them of the massacres happening before the genocide and the likelihood of a wave of ethnical/politically driven murders. Both the UNCHR and the IFHR reports were available to everyone and on February 25, 1994 the UN Secretary General was openly warned by Belgium of a genocide in the making (Stanton, 2004).

Albeit it is true that there were several pieces of information that, when analysed together, pointed at the killing of Tutsis at an unprecedented scale, for the most part such analysis was not

done. (Adelman, 1996). Even when reports reached Policy makers at the top they were met with low receptivity. For instance, the so called “genocide fax” in which UNAMIR Commander Romeo Dallaire alerted the UN Department of Peace Keeping Operations (DPKO) of preparations for mass killings, was disregarded by senior officials in the UN Secretariat (Dallaire, 2003). As a result, nor the UN or the Western Powers developed a contingency plan or any course of pre-emptive action. Some institutions, like the UN DPKO, were simply poorly prepared to do so at the time. In the words of Adelman “there was a disjuncture between information collection, analysis and the development of strategic policy options”. Arguably, the magnitude of the atrocities, rather than the fact that they took place, caught the International Community by surprise. Despite being informed about the likelihood of mass killings, no policy makers believed that there were plans to carry out a full genocide. In fact, to this day there are authors who still deny the genocide was planned at all (Collins, 2014).

Up until this point the international response could indeed be attributed to an Intelligence failure. The available fragments of evidence, for the most part, were not put together in a consistent analysis and failed to persuade policy makers to act. According to Betts, who agrees with Dahl, it is the job of Intelligence producers to “impress” consumers with the validity and the relevance of the information. Clearly, while most early warnings about the violence in Rwanda reached policy makers, they did not see them as a planning of a genocide but as a result of the political deadlock, and therefore insisted on a political solution even when it seemed obvious that both parties were failing to implement the Arusha accords (Krosiak, 2007). On their defence It must be said that decision makers at the top, were faced with confusing signals, numerous competing demands for their attention and resources constrains (Adelman 1996). It is only post facto, that all the Intelligence previously presented appears self-evident, as it is seen together and without any contradictory indicators.

However, the response of the international community did not change much after April 7th, when the genocide was ongoing and undeniable, which suggests that there was something more than an Intelligence failure to it. As early as April 7th the US Defence Intelligence Agency intercepted radio messages that announced organized mass killings, which the US Diplomats in Kigali called genocide from the same day (Stanton, 2004). Right after the downing of the presidential plane, a French evacuation force was sent Kigali becoming first hand witness of the massacres. The French DGSE was

also operating in Rwanda at the time which added to the number of sources (Krosiak, 2007). Similarly, all the countries with Embassies in Rwanda must have been informed by their diplomats, who were also aware. Not to speak of open source Intelligence such as NGO and media publications (Barnett, 1997). In the words of Dallaire, “by now [April 16th] one would have had to be blind or illiterate to not know what was going in Rwanda.” Yet as much as he pleaded for authorization to intervene, much needed reinforcements and supplies, the responses from the DPKO and the UN Secretariat were always negative (Dallaire, 2003).

The consensus in the International Community was that a political solution, agreed upon by both parties was the only way to end the conflict. On April 6th, right before the Genocide became a matter of fact, a decision had been made in the UNSC, UNAMIR mandate was to end in 6 weeks. If by then the transitional government devised by the Arusha accord was not in place, UNAMIR would pull out. Indeed, earlier than that and despite the ongoing genocide, UNAMIR was withdrawn except for a small 450 strong force, and thousands of civilians who had taken refuge at UN compounds were abandoned to a certain death (Dallaire, 2003). When on May 17th, after a wave of pressure from civil society, UNAMIR II was approved, the reluctance of key countries like the US, the UK and France delayed its deployment until July when an RPF victory had already put a stop to the Genocide (De Waal and Omaar, 2004). Yet, a French Intervention outside of the UNAMIR frame was launched within days in mid-June. The mission, which was justified on humanitarian grounds, was actually motivated by France’s involvement with the Rwandan government and while it did stop some of the killings it did little capture the perpetrators. What this showed is that western powers had the means to rapidly deploy an operational force when there were other interests at stake. (Krosiak, 2007).

The refusal to intervene was the result of a conscious political decision. In other words, top decision members in the UN and in key countries within the International Community, particularly the US, did not fail to act, they chose not to (Stanton, 2004). And there were powerful reasons for that; at the time the UN and member contributing nations were overwhelmed with other ongoing peace keeping operations such as the one in former Yugoslavia. Some of those interventions had proven to be very hard to get out of and a few had gone terribly wrong. The disaster of Somalia remained a vivid memory that dissuaded western involvement in Africa. For the most part western powers were simply not willing to sustain casualties as part of a peace keeping operation in a country like Rwanda, which had little or no relevance for their national interest. Evidence of this, is the fact

that Belgium, who had been one of the proponents of UNAMIR, pulled out its forces on April 12th after ten of their peace keepers were killed. Shortly after, they argued for total withdrawal (Maritz, 2012). For the US, the only actor that could have changed the tide, Rwanda did not meet the requirements for an intervention, namely it did not affect national interest (Grünfeld and Huijboom, 2007).

If the UNSC seemed confused regarding the situation it was precisely because its members were determined to see the violence from the lenses of the civil war, and therefore as responsibility of the parties involved. According to Stanton there was a lot of “dancing around to avoid the G word,” because to recognize the ongoing genocide would imply a duty to act. It is mainly because of that they met the oncoming flow of Intelligence with zero receptivity. The vindictive attitude of the RPF and the Rwandan delegation in the UNSC also played into this narrative. It wasn't until June 8th that the UNSC described the killings as Genocide, and yet the reluctance to contribute continued to impede UNAMIR II from being operational (Krosiak, 2007).

IV. Conclusions

The reality is that self-interest is a very, if not the most, powerful driver behind political decisions. As Stanton puts it “Rwandan lives were not worth saving”. Policy makers were well informed and if they were so reluctant was because they knew the costs of the kind of intervention that was needed to stop the genocide. As morally reprehensible as it is, it is understandable that few of them were willing to jeopardize their careers knowing that they wouldn't be held responsible for failing to act. Let us remember that a few years earlier another genocide had taken place in Burundi without much of a reaction from the International Community. Although part of the blame could be assigned to intelligence officials, ultimately the failure to stop the Rwandan Genocide was a political failure (Stanton, 2004). To argue otherwise would expand the concept of Intelligence failure beyond any reasonable limit.

V. Bibliography

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