

French Support for Habyarimana

From the outset of the war with the RPF, Rwanda had been firmly backed by France. Able to rely on this steady support from a major international actor, Habyarimana was in a strong position to confront threats from the RPF, reproaches from other foreign powers, and opposition from dissidents within Rwanda. Fluent in French, apparently a devout Catholic, Habyarimana impressed French president François Mitterrand and others with his assimilation of French values. In the French system, where the president exercised enormous control over African policy, Mitterrand's bond with Habyarimana counted for a great deal. The French ambassador in Kigali, Georges Martres, also was close to Habyarimana, whose home he visited frequently. Habyarimana found his support so precious that he wrote Mitterrand in January 1993 asking that Martres not be retired for reasons of age, as French regulations required, but rather allowed to continue his service in Kigali. Mitterrand, to his regret, could prolong his term only until April 1993. High-ranking military officers, both those in the field and those in Paris, were strongly committed to helping their Rwandan colleagues fight a force that some of them labeled the "Khmers Noirs," a reference to the Khmer Rouge terrorists in Cambodia. The French Foreign Ministry officials were less enthusiastic about the Rwandan president; but they could do little to change policy so long as he enjoyed the firm support of Mitterrand and the military.⁶²

The readiness to back Habyarimana rested on broader bases than personal connections. Mitterrand, like many French policy-makers, believed that France must continue to have strong links with African allies if it were to have any stature on the international scene. By definition, such allies were French-speaking. Among them, Rwanda had a special status because it was not a former French colony, but an ally that had been won away from Belgium, its old colonial master. Backing Rwanda offered the chance not just to outdo Belgium but also to humiliate the Anglo-Saxon forces thought to be behind the largely English-speaking RPF. According to former French minister Bernard Debré, Mitterrand believed that the U.S. had "hegemonic aims" in the region.⁶³ François Leotard, former minister of defense, agreed with this assessment. He told members of the French assembly,

The President of the Republic was the person who in his comments seemed to define best the balance of power between the Anglo-Saxons and the French in this part of the world, and to do so with the greatest precision and sense of strategy and history.⁶⁴

This reasoning, so redolent of nineteenth-century colonial passions, seems in fact to have motivated much of French policy about Rwanda. The French dreaded an upset in Rwanda, which they had come to regard as part of their backyard, *le pré carré*. If Habyarimana were to lose, it would be the first time that a regime loyal to France had been removed without prior French approval. Powerholders dependent upon French support elsewhere on the continent were watching the outcome carefully and might judge the usefulness of a continuing French alliance according to the result.⁶⁵ Gérard Prunier, an analyst well-informed about the French Defense Ministry, has suggested that Habyarimana may have helped France with some illegitimate business in the past, perhaps passing on arms shipments to embargoed countries, and thus made the French feel more obligated to support him.⁶⁶

In addition to these general considerations, French policymakers also supported Rwanda in order to have a firm base for dealing with potential crises in Zaire. In January 1993, a report by the Treasury concluded that "with the risks of Zaire disintegrating, Rwanda remains an interesting pole of political and economic influence in the region."⁶⁷

Habyarimana and his supporters appreciated French backing and welcomed French troops warmly. In the December 1990 issue where *Kangura* presented the "Ten Commandments of the Hutu," it printed a picture of Mitterrand on the back cover with the comment, "It is in hard times that you know your real friends." When the CDR demonstrated against peace negotiations

in October 1992, they acknowledged French support by chanting “Thank you, President Mitterrand” and “Thank you, French people.”⁶⁸

Besides steady political and moral backing, France gave Rwanda more immediately practical help, a contingent of soldiers in October 1990 and reinforcements in later times of crisis. Although French authorities generally asserted that only some 600 soldiers were in Rwanda, they in fact maintained as many as 1,100 there at one time.⁶⁹ The troops included two groups, one called the *Noroît* detachment, supposedly there to protect French citizens, and the other, a military assistance mission to “train” Rwandan soldiers. The “protection of French citizens” was only a cover—the French numbered only a few hundred and were not threatened—but the training was real. As the Rwandan army expanded from fewer than 10,000 to more than 30,000 soldiers, the French played an important role in training both the combatants and soldiers who would in turn serve as instructors for others. Some of these French-trained soldiers passed on their knowledge to the party militia *Interahamwe* and *Impuzamugambi*.⁷⁰

French soldiers sometimes delivered their “training” in a surprisingly direct manner. On February 3, 1992, the Rwandan Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote to the French embassy in Kigali to ask approval for naming Lieutenant Colonel Chollet, head of the French military assistance mission, adviser to Habyarimana. In this capacity, Chollet would advise on “organization of the defense and on the operations of the military,” duties which would require him to “work in close collaboration” with officers even at the local level. The arrangement would have effectively placed responsibility for military operations in French hands. The letter was leaked to the press and the proposal seemed to have been aborted. But, in April 1992, Lt. Col. Jean-Jacques Maurin was named adjoint to the French military attaché in Kigali and filled just the role proposed for Chollet. He advised the Rwandan chief of staff in such tasks as drawing up daily battle plans, accompanied him around the country, and participated in daily meetings of the general staff.⁷¹ In addition, French soldiers on the ground were assisting in combat, in interrogating military prisoners, and in enforcing control measures on the civilian population.⁷² A former French army chief of staff later denied that French troops joined in fighting, but admitted that, given the small size of the country, French troops were “close to combat.”⁷³ The former Rwandan minister of defense, James Gasana, stated that Rwandan military could use heavy weapons given by France only after having received French permission to use them.⁷⁴ According to one French “instructor,” French trainers positioned the heavy artillery to bombard the RPF and then stood back to let Rwandan soldiers push the button to fire the weapon. French soldiers played such a key role in defending Ruhengeri in January 1991 that a French commander asked the Rwandan government to award medals to some of the troops.⁷⁵

France officially supported peace efforts and was one of the sponsors of the Arusha Accords which stipulated the withdrawal of all foreign troops, except those involved in bilateral military cooperation arrangements. According to Gasana, however, who participated in some of the Arusha negotiations, the French were far less intent on a negotiated solution than were the U.S. and Belgium. Their support for Habyarimana and the MRND was such that they gave the impression that they actually favored a military solution to the conflict.⁷⁶ On August 26, 1992, three weeks after the first part of the Accords was signed, Ambassador Martres formally agreed with the Rwandan government to expand the limited French military training program to the whole Rwandan army, making it possible to increase the number of “instructors” while removing combat troops. On January 18, 1993, Mitterrand addressed the delicate problem of continued military assistance in a letter to Habyarimana. Remarking that he would not want France to be reproached with having undermined the Arusha Accords, he continued, “I wish to confirm that on the question of the presence of the *Noroît* detachment [the combat troops], France will act in accord with [the wishes of] the Rwandan authorities.”⁷⁷

In February 1993 French authorities once more proved their support by sending more than 500 troops to “indirectly command” and assist the Rwandan forces in halting the RPF advance.⁷⁸ They also stepped up delivery of arms and ammunition, sending up to twenty tons of arms a day, enough to cut into the stocks of the French army itself.⁷⁹ After a visit to Rwanda to assess the situation, then Minister of Cooperation Marcel Debarge reported to Mitterrand that the “indirect military support” provided by France was not enough and that a “real intervention force” (*une véritable force d’interposition*) was necessary to enforce the Arusha Accords. Unwilling to have France supply such a force, Mitterrand then ordered his subordinates to get the U.N. more involved.⁸⁰ French diplomats worked so hard to get a U.N. peacekeeping force to replace its soldiers in aiding their ally that, according to one member of the Security Council, the effort became “a standing joke.”⁸¹

From the beginning of the war in 1990, French authorities understood the risk of genocide. Colonel Rwagafilita, Habyarimana’s close associate, told the general who directed French military cooperation in Rwanda that the Tutsi “are very few in number, we will liquidate them.”⁸² Many of the French who dealt with Habyarimana believed that he wanted to keep the extremists in check and could do so only with their continued political and military support. They were well aware of the massacres and other human rights violations carried out by his government and they pressed him—but only discretely—to end such practices. Reluctant to weaken their loyal client in any way, they sought to minimize any criticism of him. Thus Ambassador Martres dismissed reports of massacres as “just rumors”⁸³ and a supporter within the French Foreign Ministry wrote soon after the International Commission published its report that the Habyarimana regime was “rather respectful of human rights and on the whole concerned about good administration.” In a shocking echo of extremist Hutu propaganda, this author explained that the RPF, and not Habyarimana, should be blamed for the massacres of the Tutsi, because their agents (*provocateurs*) had infiltrated and caused the Bugesera massacre as well as the slaughter of the Bagogwe in 1991.⁸⁴ As part of an effort to shore up Habyarimana and discredit further the RPF, the French secret service (Direction Générale des Services Extérieurs, DSGE) planted news stories about supposed Ugandan support for the guerrilla movement. On February 21, 1993, thereputable *Le Monde* published an account of a RPF massacre of hundreds of civilians that had in fact never taken place.⁸⁵

When the French National Assembly held an inquiry on Rwanda in 1998, French political leaders, bureaucrats, and military officers all declared that their policy was intended to encourage political reform and respect for human rights within Rwanda as well as to avoid a military victory by the RPF. On the basis of the unstinting support received from Mitterrand on down, Habyarimana and his circle concluded that the French valued the second objective more than the first. Thus convinced, they dared to continue the campaign against the Tutsi that would finally reach the point of genocide.

[Footnotes]

62 Jouan, “Rwanda 1990-1994,” p. 23.

63 Assemblée Nationale, Mission d’information commune, *Enquête*, Tome III, Auditions, Volume 1, p. 413.

64 Ibid., p. 112.

65 Hubert Vedrine, minister of foreign affairs, expressed such a concern. Ibid., p. 212.

66 Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, pp. 102-6, 147-49, 163-64, 278-79; Reyntjens, *L’Afrique des Grands Lacs*, pp. 178-79.

67 Jouan, “Rwanda, 1990-1994,” p. 24.

Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda

68 Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, p. 163.

69 Ibid., p. 164, n. 9.

70 Several foreign diplomats based in Kigali, who had seen French soldiers at a militia training site at Gabiro, in the game park in eastern Rwanda, even asserted that the French themselves had trained militia. Prunier, usually well-informed about French military matters, has said that the French may well have trained militia without distinguishing them from regular recruits, who were receiving training so summary that it differed little from that given to the irregulars. Adelman and Suhrke, *Early Warning*, p. 87, n. 50; Human Rights Watch/FIDH interview, Washington, December 9, 1995.

71 Guichaoua, *Les Crises Politiques*, pp. 712-13; Assemblée Nationale, Mission d'information commune, *Enquête*, Tome I, Rapport, pp. 151-52.

72 Testimony of Eric Gillet, reported in *L'événement du Jeudi*, June 25-July 2, 1992; Assemblée Nationale, Mission d'information commune, *Enquête*, Tome I, Rapport, pp. 158-68.

73 Testimony of Amiral Lanxade, Mission d'Information, May 6, 1998; Assemblée Nationale, Mission d'information commune, *Enquête*, Tome III, Auditions, Volume 1, p. 241.

74 Assemblée Nationale, Mission d'information commune, *Enquête*, Tome III, Auditions, Volume 2, p. 47.

75 Human Rights Watch Arms Project, "Arming Rwanda," p. 24; Reyntjens, *L'Afrique des Grands Lacs*, pp. 176-77; Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, pp. 149, 177; Adelman and Suhrke, *Early Warning*, pp. 22-23 and notes; Stephen Smith, "France-Rwanda: Lévirat Colonial et Abandon Dans la Région des Grands Lacs," in Guichaoua, *Les Crises Politiques*, p.450; Guichaoua, on pages 720-21, reprints the important account of French military activity by Hervé Gattegno, published in *Le Monde*, September 22, 1994.

76 Assemblée Nationale, Mission d'information commune, *Enquête*, Tome III, Auditions, Volume 2, p. 53.

77 Guichaoua, *Les Crises Politiques*, p. 714; Reyntjens, *L'Afrique des Grands Lacs*, p. 205; Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, p.173.

78 Assemblée Nationale, Mission d'information commune, *Enquête*, Tome I, Rapport, pp. 157, 159.

79 Smith, "France-Rwanda," p. 450.

80 Assemblée Nationale, Mission d'information commune, *Enquête*, Tome III, Auditions, Volume 2, p.14.

81 Adelman and Suhrke, *Early Warning*, p. 27.

82 Assemblée Nationale, Mission d'information commune, *Enquête*, Tome I, Rapport, p. 276.

83 Smith, "France-Rwanda," p. 451; Assemblée Nationale, Mission d'information commune, *Enquête*, Tome III, Auditions, Volume 1, p. 122.

84 Jouan, "Rwanda 1990-1994," p. 31.

85 Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, p. 176 and note.