

The genocide and war in Rwanda, 1990-1994

Tony Sullivan

September 8, 2006

Between half a million and a million people out of Rwanda's total population of 8 million, died in a few weeks between April and June 1994. This article gives a brief account of how, and why and what role Western governments played.

For a background history of Rwanda and neighbouring Burundi, we recommend reading our article *Rwanda and Burundi – A History, 1894-1990*.

The United Nations is often condemned for its role during the genocide. Usually the UN is accused of a cowardly reluctance to act forcefully enough to prevent the killings. In truth the United Nations was complicit in key stages of a monumental crime against humanity. The accusation of cowardice comes because UN troops were withdrawn from the country just as the massacres were beginning, and a later contingent of French forces, mandated by the UN to intervene, arrived in Rwanda only as the slaughter was tailing off.

The real problem however is that these French troops were aiding the Rwandan army and its Hutu militia allies, the very forces butchering Rwanda's minority Tutsi population. France had been arming, training and

funding the Habyarimana regime in Rwanda for years, years during which the Tutsi minority had already been subjected to ferocious persecution. The UN and great powers behind it must have known this very well before they endorsed the French intervention.

In 1994 the Rwandan regime was rapidly crumbling before a rebel army – the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) – which, as it advanced, was putting a stop to the genocide in one region of the country after another. The speed of the rebels' advance meant life or death for tens of thousands of Tutsis. France intervened to create 'safe havens', supposedly to protect the lives of civilians from the majority Hutu group from Tutsi revenge. In reality they were attempting to slow the rebels' advance and protecting the remains of the Rwandan regime from them.

As it turned out the French could not save the regime but did save the organisers of the genocide from capture. The 'safe havens' became a base from which these people engineered the flight of almost two million Hutus into neighbouring countries, where they have since languished in disease-ridden squalor under the control of the soldiers and militias of the fallen Government.

These refugee camps then served

as a springboard for armed incursions into Rwanda in which great numbers of Tutsis and anti-racist Hutus have died or been mutilated.

There are remarkable parallels between the atrocities in Rwanda and East Timor : in the genocides themselves, planned at governmental level and carried out by an army and government-organised militias, and in the role played by USA and other western powers in arming these murderous regimes. And just as Australia was at the forefront in supplying and training Indonesia's military and in pushing the diplomatic cause of Suharto and Habibie worldwide, France acted as benefactor and international champion for the bestial regime in Rwanda.

The Rwandan Patriotic Front

Just as an economic crisis was breaking in the late 1980s the Habyarimana Government faced a new armed threat. In neighbouring Uganda the National Resistance Army led by Yoweri Museveni had taken power in 1986. Many Tutsis, refugees from persecution in the early 1960s, had fought with the rebels. They now formed the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF). Although led by Tutsis the RPF was 40 % Hutu in composition.

In September 1990 it conquered territory in the north of the country and quickly gained support from Hutu farmers.

France arms and trains the killers

Habyarimana would soon have fallen to the the well armed and trained

RPF but for French military intervention. In October 1990 French forces seized Rwanda's international airport and turned the tide against the rebels.

The battle with the RPF was used as a pretext to arrest up to 8,000 people in the capital Kigali, mostly Tutsis, and to launch pogroms in the countryside. Quote :

"There were beatings, rapes and murders. Rwandan intelligence distributed Kalashnikovs to municipal authorities in selected villages. They gathered with ruling party militants, most of whom carried staves, clubs and machetes... they went from field to field in search of Tutsis, killing thousands... "Civilians were killed, as in any war" said Colonel Bernard Cussac, France's ranking military commander in Kigali." (Frank Smyth, The Australian 10.6.94)

French arms and military advisors poured into the country. In the following two years the Rwandan army grew from 5,000 to 30,000.

The BBC's Panorama program said that the Rwandan Government 'thanked France for help which was "invaluable in combat situations" and recommended 15 French soldiers for medals after one engagement in 1991.' (Reuters World Service 21.8.95)

In 1992 Lieutenant Colonel Chollet, commander of the French forces in Rwanda, became President Habyarimana's defacto army chief of staff. In February 1993 French forces again beat back an RPF attack.

Cutting across all this were pressure from Belgium and from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) for Rwanda to agree to a power sharing deal with the RPF. The OAU wanted to assert its own tattered authority and to prevent the conflict desta-

bilising central Africa.

Under this pressure Habyarimana allowed the reintroduction multi-party politics in June 1991, and brought moderate Hutu opponents into his Cabinet in 1992.

This seems to have hardened sections of the ruling elite around a violently racist solution to the crisis. They now stepped up the organisation of the Hutu militias.

The United Nation's human rights investigator for Rwanda, Rene Degni-Segui, later recounted Quote :

“a radio and television campaign inciting violence, distribution of arms to civilians and militias at year-end, military training of militias between November 1993 and March 1994 and lists of opposition leaders to execute... Mr Degni-Segui laid responsibility on high-ranking political officials, including "certain ministers" of the interim government, the presidential guard, the armed forces and paramilitary police as well as certain local authorities.” (The Age 2.7.94)

French forces superintended the organisation of the militias, known as the Interahamwe. Janvier Africa, son of a Rwandan diplomat, and a former Interahamwe member, described French involvement : Quote :

“We had two French military who helped train the Interahamwe. A lot of other Interahamwe were sent for training in Egypt. The French military taught us how to catch people and tie them. It was at the Affichier Central base in the centre of Kigali. It's where people were tortured. That's where the French military office was... The French also went with us Interahamwe to Mount Kigali, where they gave us training with guns. We didn't know how to use the arms which had been

brought from France so the French military were obliged to show us.” (Quoted in The Age, 23.6.94 p12)

Amnesty International has made similar allegations against the French government (Financial Times 12.7.94).

The genocide

In early April 1994 Habyarimana signed the Arusha peace accord accord with the RPF, at which he was suspected by his supporters of agreeing to share power with Tutsis – the former ruling minority group of Rwanda and Burundi. Returning from Arusha on 6 April he was killed when his plane was shot down, almost certainly the work of his own Presidential Guard. Less than 30 minutes later – even before his death was announced – the massacres began.

The Presidential Guard began picking off opposition politicians, civil rights activists, and moderate Hutus, including the new Prime Minister Agatha Uwilingiyimana. Then the army and Interahamwe were unleashed on the Tutsi population. Quote :

“As I travelled from one refugee camp to another I heard numerous stories of Government soldiers in Rwanda giving people a choice : they could either buy a bullet, which would be used to kill them instantly, or be hacked to death by a machete. All paid the price...

The Kagera has become a river of blood... at one point 87 bodies flowed past in an hour... One of the bodies arrived still dressed in a business suit. One was a priest, another a woman with the body of her child still wrapped tightly around her back. With so many bodies reaching Uganda one can only imagine what the killing fields

must look like inside Rwanda, where half a million are believed to have been slaughtered." (Glenn Daniel, *The Australian* 10.6.94)

The only force resisting the genocide was the RPF. How quickly it could advance each day against the collapsing Rwandan army meant life or death for tens of thousands of Tutsis.

How did the Western powers respond to the genocide? The BBC's Panorama program recounted how on 8 April, the second night of the slaughter, three plane loads of French troops arrived in Kigali. Colonel Luc Marchal, a UN commander in Rwanda, told Panorama: "Two of those three planes were carrying personnel and one was for carrying ammunition... to the Rwandan army." (*The Age* 21.8.95)

What of the UN?

As soon as the scale of the massacres became clear the UN withdrew most of its 2,500 troops in the country. But the UN did not simply abandon the Rwanda. Amid a confusion of conflicting motives, the driving force of UN policy was French concern that their allies were losing the civil war, and that if action was not taken the RPF would soon smash the old regime altogether and capture its leadership.

In June the UN sanctioned the intervention of 5,500 French troops in Rwanda. But two Belgian newspapers said French troops were already in Rwanda without waiting for UN permission. In Washington the State Department said the Secretary of State, Mr Warren Christopher, had informed his French counterpart, Mr Alain Juppe, that the US supported France's military initiative.

The force was opposed not just by

the RPF, who of course knew what to expect from it, but also by leading anti-racist Hutus opposed to the Rwandan Government: Quote:

"A moderate Hutu leader, who has been designated as Rwanda's future Prime Minister, said yesterday he, too opposed French intervention in his country... Mr Faustin Twagiramunga of the Democratic Republic Movement party said at the UN: 'I appreciate France's being an economic and military power in the world. But there is a certain suspicion [of France's offer]'". (*The Australian* 22.6.94)

The French were soon engaged against the rebels. In June the capital, Kigali, was about to fall to the RPF. French troops were ordered to halt the RPF's advance. Parachutists and Foreign Legionnaires were told "to fight any attempt to penetrate the [French] security zone in the south west." (*Guardian Weekly*, 10.7.94)

The refugee crisis

As RPF forces swept through Rwanda in June, France, with endorsement from the UN Security Council, launched Operation Turquoise, setting up 'safe havens' protected by French troops along the border with Zaire. Allegedly to protect refugees, the havens were in fact designed to save the organisers of the genocide from the RPF.

"The RPF is going to be very surprised," declared Colonel Jacques Rosier, southern commander of the operation. "We won't call this Dien Bien Phu, we'll call it Austerlitz." (*Reuters World Service* 4.7.94. Dien Bien Phu was the scene of France's final military humiliation in Vietnam in 1954. Austerlitz was the scene of a French victory in the Napoleonic Wars.)

As the RPF closed in on Gisenyi, the last major town under the old Government's control, Quote :

"French forces said they would give the Hutu politicians, blamed for the massacres, refuge in their safety zones if they fled there... Brigadier-General Jean-Claude Lafourcade, head of France's Operation Turquoise, told a news briefing in the Zairean town of Goma where the French are headquartered : 'If they (Rwandan Government) flee to out areas of operation, we would allow them in as mere refugees.'" (Buchizya Mseteka, Reuters World Service 11.7.94)

The leaders of the Hutu army and militias fled to these 'safe havens' with trucks, heavy weapons, and radio transmitters. They used the havens as bases for propaganda aimed at panicking ordinary Hutus into flight from Rwanda into Zaire. Quote :

"Both the guilty and the innocent have fled Rwanda, driven by terror. The mass hysteria has been generated by the propaganda spewing from the Hutu extremist-controlled radio stations in the French "humanitarian zones" and neighbouring Zaire. In the wake of the wholesale slaughter of Tutsi by Hutu militia, many feared a similar fate at the hands of the victorious Rwandan Patriotic Front. In truth, there is little evidence of reprisal killings, other than random acts of violence by individuals." (David Dorward, The Age 23.7.94 p.17)

There were also reports of soldiers from the defeated government forcing people at gunpoint to cross the border into Zaire. Between one and two million Hutus became refugees.

How did French forces, and their friends in the toppled Rwandan Government, assist these fleeing Hutu ci-

vilians in the safe havens? Quote :

"We have no water, no toilets. We are suffering here. No food. The Government has brought us nothing. Nobody is helping us,' said Jean-de-Dieu Hariman, a refugee from the capital Kigali who trekked westwards, driven by the rapidly advancing front...

Family Minister Pauline Nyiramasuhko, speaking in the luxurious and well-guarded confines of the Meridian Hotel, said an estimated 500,000 Hutu refugees had flooded into the Gisenyi district... the ministers insist that having fled from the capital and the town of Gitarama they will stay with their people in Gisenyi." (Guy Dinmore, Reuters World Service, 11.7.94)

The militias were intending to use the refugees to reassert their control and used them as bargaining chips, a recruiting ground, and a springboard from which to destabilise the new RPF government in Rwanda.

The refugees soon began to die from dehydration and cholera : the international aid effort did not supply anywhere near the support needed even to maintain lives. Meanwhile the militias commandeered food supplies and began launching incursions into Rwanda.

In the aftermath of the genocide the UN continued to support French interventions on behalf of the killers. In late 1994 a draft UN resolution set up an international tribunal to prosecute war crimes in Rwanda. But it accepted a French amendment to treat the new RPF Government and the murderous ex-Government of Rwanda as equally guilty parties in the massacres : Quote :

"Several human rights groups and international organisations believe that France is behind efforts to hin-

der prosecution of Rwanda's former leaders.

'The French Government wants to encourage the perception that there have been two genocides in Rwanda : one organised the the Hutus against the Tutsis, and a second one now organised by the RPF,' said Sharon Cortoux, of Survie, a French group that monitors France's African policies.

'The main purpose is to blur France's reponsibility in what happened. If it can succeed, then France can say : "You cannot blame us for backing the Hutu extremists ; both sides are just as bad"'.(The Age 3.11.94)

The UN-backed French intervention succeeded in allowing the organisers of the genocide to survive politically and militarily. The leaders fled to friendly countries such as Kenya, while the foot soldiers of the militia remained along the borders of Rwanda.

Thanks to this Tutsis and anti-racist Hutus in Rwanda have continued to die in large numbers from cross-border raids. According to one report only 8,000 Tutsis remained in the Kibuye region of western Rwanda by 1996, from 252,000 before 1994, and these were still being picked off : Quote :

"Throughout Rwanda survivors of the Tutsi genocide, which started on 16 April 1994, are being hunted down and murdered. They are dying in such numbers that some refuse to call this the 'post-genocide' period. People are attacked with nail-studded clubs, machetes, axes and grenades... One night in January last year grenades were thrown at an orphanage for Tutsi orphans of the genocide in Kamembe, Cyangugu." (The Age 4.4.96)

The incursions have continued into the new century. 31 Rwandans, inclu-

ding children, have just died from a raid. (SBS News 1.1.2000)

France's motives

France wanted to dominate the region. It wanted to protect economic interests in neighbouring Zaire, which, despite its ravaged economy, has great mineral wealth.

Zaire was ruled at the time by the hated dictator Mobutu. Mobutu had a personal fortune of \$5 billion, about the amount of Zaire's national debt. Wages in Zaire were a tenth of what they had at independence. Malnutrition was rife although Zaire has rich farming land, has suffered no drought and contains immense reserves of minerals, water and forests. But Mobutu was a loyal ally of the West.

France also desired to maintain its international prestige and bargaining power by controlling French-speaking Africa, a group of twenty-one nations which included Rwanda. The RPF were led by English speakers.

Earlier in 1994 the French Government, with the backing of the IMF and World Bank, imposed a devaluation of the CFA currency used by most former French African colonies. Now France feared additionally that the fall of the Rwandan government would connect with unrest in its own former colonies.

Other Western involvement

France was not alone in having backed Rwanda's Habyarimana regime. Rwanda's army officers were trained in Belgium and the USA. The white apartheid government in South Africa sold arms to Habyarimana, as did several countries of the old Eastern bloc.

The USA and most other western powers were not, however, committed to the Rwandan regime in the same sense as was France. In fact the USA soon moved to ally with the new RPF Government in Rwanda, welcoming the chance for a counter-weight to French influence in the region.

But neither the USA nor any other Western power saw an interest in exposing France's complicity in the killings, far less confronting it on the ground.

France is part of the alliance of Western nations dominating the globe that form the core of the UN Security Council and dominate the decisions of the UN as a whole. Minor strategic differences, such as whether or not to back a genocidal regime in Africa, are not allowed to disturb this underlying harmony of purpose.

There is a gentleman's agreement not to interfere too deeply with one another's military adventures. As one report put it, the the US had 'little choice' but to back France's Operation Turquoise : Quote :

"Washington had asked the [UN Security] council for similar endorsement for its operations in Iraq and Somalia and might have to do so again if a decision was made to invade Haiti, diplomats said." (Marie Joannidis and Evelyn Leopold, The Australian 24.6.94)

The UN's cover-up

Kofi Annan, the UN's Secretary-General, set up an inquiry into the

UN's role during the Rwandan genocide, under the auspices of Ingvar Carlsson, a former Swedish Prime Minister. Predictably the report restrains its criticism to the inaction of the UN, e.g. in failing to follow up a telegram warning of the imminent slaughter. Allowing for this the report remains inadequate, even to an establishment journal such as The Economist : Quote :

"The Rwandans were let down most of all by the permanent members of the Security Council – and not, for once, China and Russia, but America, Britain and France. The Carlsson report criticises them obliquely, but does little to examine their individual roles in the disaster, perhaps because it was unable to question closely the grantees of the Security Council. Though it had complete access to UN records and any UN official, it interviewed no British representatives and was allowed access only to American and French officials who were peripheral at the time." (23.12.1999)

Edited by libcom from an article The UN in Rwanda By Tony Sullivan Sources

Other sources not already cited : Economist Intelligence Unit, Zaire/Rwanda/Burundi, 1991-2; Europa Year Book 1993; Socialist Worker 10 June 1994; Rwanda, Randall Fegley; Socialist Review 178, September 1994