



*iqbal riza*

He is Chief of Staff to the U.N. Secretary-General, Kofi Annan. During the events in Rwanda, he was deputy to Annan, who was then head of U.N. peacekeeping. In this interview Riza responds to charges that high-level U.N. officials knew in advance of the possibility that mass killings would occur. He also discusses the constraints facing U.N. forces in Rwanda and how the failed U.N./U.S. peacekeeping mission in Somalia a few months earlier profoundly influenced the West's response to the Rwandan genocide.

We happened to be there on a peacekeeping mandate. Our mandate was not to anticipate and prevent genocide. Our people on the ground-- lightly equipped troops under a very courageous commander-- did the best they could. When the killing actually started, they could not save every life in Rwanda.

**At the time [1993], how did you rate the chances of success with the United Nations mission (UNAMIR) in Rwanda?**

We rated the chances as fair, simply because the successes ... really depend on the will of the parties. If one or both wish to sabotage the agreement, there's nothing we can do to stop that. We've seen the situation in Angola, now, as an illustration.

**Can you remember the circumstances of the night in January 1994 when the coded cable from your force commander in Rwanda landed on your desk?**

I was in my office ... and I believe if I remember correctly, it was brought to us by the military advisor, the General Baril to whom it had been addressed by General Dallaire ... and we went over it.

It alarmed us, it alarmed us. But there were certain clarifications that we felt were essential ...

**Was this a normal kind of cable from the force commander?**

There are a number of cables that we get of this nature, but not of this magnitude. Not with such dire predictions. But obviously this was from one source and we had to ask the mission to find out how reliable this source was, particularly since in the cable itself, after the 11th of January, General Baril had said that he was not sure whether ... since the informant was connected to a high political personality, whether a set-up, as he said, was being prepared for that political personality. All these contradictions were there, so we had to be sure that there was substance to it. It was alarming. Now it had predicted that these killings would start in a matter of days. As weeks pass, the killings, yes, were occurring. There was an atmosphere of

*home  
interviews  
days of slaughter  
ignored warning  
readings  
somalia debacle*

widespread violence, but there was no dramatic increase. What was predicted in this cable did not happen for several weeks, and I think we were all caught unawares when the situation just exploded on the 6th of April.

**What did you tell your force commander to do about the informant that night?**

It's not only the force commander. The title of the mission is United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda, to assist the parties in implementing the agreement that they had signed. So, we said, "Please go to the president [Habyarimana], because we assume he does not have this information. Go to the president, tell him what information you have, and say that we will be watching the situation very carefully and we would expect him to take steps to prevent any such actions being taken, such as the distribution of arms."

As important, if more important, we asked him and the head of the mission--who is the special representative, who also went to see the president--to see the three ambassadors who were very closely associated with the agreement and its implementation. That was Belgium, France, and U.S. They were actually given copies of the cable. And so the parties directly concerned in Kigali, which is the U.N. mission, the president, and three ambassadors, had this information and were closely monitoring events. As I told you, over the succeeding weeks, there was no dramatic change in the situation. The violence did continue, but more or less at the same level.

**When the force commander wanted to go on arms raid in those circumstances, how did you react?**

We said, "Not Somalia, again." We have to go by the mandate that we are given by the Security Council. It's not up to the secretary-general or the Secretariat to decide whether they're going to run off in other directions.

**You thought this could be another Somalia?**

Oh yes, Somalia was always there in any operations that involved risk.

**So don't have another Somalia.**

Unless it's within your mandate. And it was not.

**And that was your worry. This could have been another Somalia?**

Absolutely. Now in Somalia, those troops--U.S., Pakistani--they were acting within their mandate when they were killed. Here, Dallaire was asking to take such risks going outside his mandate. And we said no.

**So you told the force commander not to go ahead with the raids on arms caches that he was planning that night. Wasn't that a mistake?**

No, I don't think that was a mistake. We are given a specific mandate by the Security Council. These troops are not our troops. We have to borrow them from governments, who give them in the context of that mandate, for the tasks to be performed in that mandate.

**One of the tasks was to make the capital Kigali a weapons-secure area, and that's precisely what the force commander surely wanted to do there.**

Certainly. He has to assist the parties in making it a weapons-secure area, not go and recover weapons himself.

**But in this case the parties may well have been, as he hinted, some of those who were hiding the weapons.**

And that is why we went to the president who was one of the parties who had signed the agreement.

**But wouldn't that be telling exactly the person who was in on the conspiracy that you knew about it?**

This was a person who was assassinated so that the genocide could begin.

**But his camp and those around him were part of the conspiracy.**

Oh, his camp, yes, but we were dealing with the president. He was the authority who had signed the agreement, who was responsible for implementing the agreement. We could not have kept him in the dark.

**Did you tell Mr. Kofi Annan about the cable from the force commander?**

Mr. Annan was head of the department. He used to see the cables. Yes, we must have briefed him the following day or maybe a day or two later.

**... After you had told the force commander not to do anything.**

Absolutely. I was in charge of the mission and I decided on what instructions were sent.

**So the decision not to act, the responsibility rests with you.**

Those were the instructions that went under my signature, yes.

**Do you regret what you did?**

Of course we do. We regret, in hindsight, that we did not interpret the information in that cable to be the truth.

**How do you think you should have interpreted it?**

Now, let me say one thing. We can't pretend that this was the only source of information, this cable. As I mentioned, the cable, itself, was given to various people in Kigali, various governments. These governments and other governments had their own sources of information, of intelligence. As events unfolded, what I recall the scene to be is that everyone involved was preoccupied with a political solution. A transitional government should have been established by the 31st of December. Here we were going through January, February and March, without this government. This was the first priority, and, clearly, when I looked through the cables last night, it comes out very clearly that the conviction was that if they had a political solution, then the violence would subside. In other words, the violence was not connected to a planning of a genocide, nobody saw it like that. It was seen as a result of a political deadlock.

**The cable was quite clear. The cable said that the informer had been trained to exterminate Tutsis. That wasn't political, that was a kind of genocide, truly.**

Look, since the 1960s, there have been cycles of violence--Tutsis against Hutus, Hutus against Tutsis. I'm sorry to put it so cynically. It was nothing new. This had continued from the '60s through the '70s into the '80s and here it was in the '90s ...

**[What] of the point, that you should have seen it coming, that it had happened before? And here was the detail that proved it was going to happen again ... on an even greater scale.**

Look, this was one of the worst instances of violence and killings that had occurred after the Second World War. All of us deeply regret it, all of us are remorseful about it, anybody who had anything to do with it, and that means the international community, not just the United Nations. The information was there. There were two stages where we failed. Yes, we failed.

One was to correctly interpret the information, and as I say, we were not alone in that. Secondly, when the enormity became obvious on the 6th of April, to have the political will to do something about it. You know very well that when the situation exploded, what was the reaction? If the political will had been there, it should have been to strengthen the mission, give it a stronger mandate and try to stop these killings. Instead, the

strongest contingent was immediately withdrawn and the Security Council put the decision to reduce this mission to less than 10% of its size.

**Just to be clear, you were saying that Mr. Kofi Annan, who was at that time head of peacekeeping, future U.N. Secretary-General--he did back you in your decision not to act on the force commander's cable?**

Yes, he did. And I think you should ask the reason why. As I was explaining to you, the troops we get are for a certain purpose. Let me read to you the mandate we were given, "Contribute to the security of Kigali through the weapons-secure area established by the parties. By the parties. Monitor observance of the cease-fire agreement and the demarcation of the demilitarized zone. Monitor the security situation. Investigate non-compliance. Pursue with the parties. Report to the secretary-general."

Now in addition, a fact extremely important, of which you are aware, was the Somalia Syndrome. We're talking about this cable having come in January. Three months before in October, 18 U.S. soldiers had been killed in Somalia and that led to the collapse of the mission. Three months before that, 24 Pakistani soldiers had been killed. Both occasions, similar operations--one trying to occupy a radio station, the Americans trying to recover arms--precisely what we faced in Rwanda. We were cautious in interpreting our mandate and in giving guidance because we did not want a repetition of Somalia, casualties, fatalities, some on soldiers that were there for a peacekeeping, not a peace-enforcement operation.

**You said to the force commander, "The overriding consideration is the need to avoid entering into a course of action that might lead to the use of force."**

This mission was never designed to resort to the use of force. The missions that were designed to resort to the use of force were the missions in Somalia, which had tanks, artillery, helicopters.

**What was the point of sending soldiers if ...**

And the mission Bosnia, which had the same. There was a distinction between peacekeeping operations--there has to be a peace to keep--and peace enforcement operations, under what is called Chapter Seven of the charter, [is] where you do give enforcement responsibilities, and therefore the equipment, the personnel required.

**Weren't you desperate to avoid the use of force because you didn't want to irritate the Americans?**

Absolutely not. That was not the reason at all. I've

just given you the reason, which was Somalia. We could not risk another Somalia as it lead to the collapse of the Somalian mission. We did not want this mission to collapse. And secondly, going back to your question, the simple fact that soldiers go with light arms doesn't mean that those light arms are for offensive operations. Those light arms are for authority and for self-defense. Those are the primary reasons that these lightly armed troops are sent as peacekeepers and not as peace enforcers. That's a very important distinction.

**What was your immediate reaction when you heard of the plane crash on April the 6th?**

That was April the 6th ... our first reaction was, "Well, it was a crash." We thought it was an accident. We didn't know it was shot down, that only became apparent later. And it's never been proved, but I think everybody believes that it was a missile that shot him down, and that was the trigger for this genocide.

Incidentally, in the cable ... he says that there are seven extremist factions of this party which are out of the president's control. So it's obvious that the president had signed this agreement, had shown that he was going to implement it. These extremist factions did not want to see the Tutsis back in Rwanda. You had an advanced battalion of the Tutsis force already in Kigali. The others were supposed to come from Uganda and obviously these people decided that they were going to put an end to it. And it appears that even the government did not know.

Would you permit me to read something? This is a cable ... 15th of February from the head of the political head of the mission I should say, from the special representative. Also with some attachment from General Dallaire, where he says that, "Since last week, a significant change of attitude has occurred in the government leadership responsible for security. Specific requests have been made to UNAMIR for assistance in security operations to recover arms and grenades."

So obviously they were becoming very worried. But they did not seem to anticipate that the aim was to wipe out 10% of the country's population. Then in the same cable, please note this because you're asking why we did not authorize General Dallaire to take this action, "Neither the Rwandan army nor the gendarmerie have the resources to conduct by themselves a cordon and search for weapons and ammunitions in Kigali, even less in the rest of the country." They had requested UNAMIR to assist them in conducting such operations in order to reduce the proliferation of weapons and grenades. The army numbered then 32-35,000 and Dallaire was saying it doesn't have the capacity. The gendarmerie, as I recall is around, 20,000. They don't have the capacity to do it, and they are asking UNAMIR, who at that

time had about 1,500 to take the responsibility. We could not permit it.

And please remember that in the event when the situation exploded, it was not firearms that caused the deaths of tens and hundreds of thousands. It was machetes and clubs. The cable of 11th January referred to Kigali. The killings occurred all over Rwanda, with machetes and clubs. To have had to have stopped the genocide, we would have had to have a force in every hamlet, in every village, where neighbors were killing neighbors. So, you see, we did not see the situation at the time until it explode. But once it exploded, had we tried to pre-empt it, or to deal with it after it exploded, it would have needed a very large, powerful well-equipped force for enforcement operations with the mandate and the political support and will of the international community.

**On April the 8th, your man on the ground told you that a very well-planned, organized, deliberate campaign of terror was taking place. He said there was a ruthless campaign of ethnic cleansing and terror. Did you tell the Security Council that?**

I saw that in one of the cables I saw last night. Now, as I told you, in the month leading up to this horrible event, everybody was concentrating on the political aspects, including the special representative. I've looked at his cables, I've looked at the records of his telephone conversations. There was no reference to an impending genocide, or that these killings--this term of ethnic killings and ethnic cleansing had been there for a long time and it was adopted, of course, from Bosnia. Ethnic cleansing does not necessarily mean genocide, it means terror to drive people away.

**But there was no hint of this in what you were briefing the Security Council.**

Not that I could find. Yes, that phrase was there. But all the reporting, the assessments that we got, with the exception of this phrase, from the special representative and the force commander, were "resumption of conflict", the cease-fire has broken down and our first priority is to reestablish the cease-fire.

**So you're saying your man on the ground got it wrong?**

Oh, yes, even they thought ... there was confusion, there was confusion.

**Mr. Kovanda, [Czech Ambassador to the U.N. 1994] who was the senior member of the Council at the time, said "The Secretariat was not giving the full story. It knew much more than it was letting on, so members like us did not appreciate the distinction between civil war and genocide."**

**He said, "We were not getting the viciousness, the unfolding genocide from the person who briefed them," which was you.**

The term genocide did not, I recall, emerge until May. Ethnic killings, yes, but as I said ethnic killings was a term that had been used throughout, because they were ethnic killings since 1960. It was nothing new that had emerged. I don't recall what notes were given to me to read, I couldn't find them because I was trying to look for them last night. Possibly we did not give all the details. And if we did not, I really can't tell you what happened then to prevent us from giving those details. I really can't.

**Details of the massacres being planned?**

Not planned, but quoting from the cables. Perhaps we did not take that particular quote from the cable in the briefing that we gave to the council, because I told you, the entire impression that we got from the ground was that this was a breakdown of cease-fire, except for that one sentence, which I recall now after seeing it last night.

**So do you believe the briefing you were getting from the ground in retrospect was wrong.**

Oh, absolutely, in the first week... we did not realize what was happening ...

**But just to be clear, you had been warned that there were people being trained to kill Tutsis at the rate of up to 1,000 every 20 minutes. You'd been warned that there were weapons distributed throughout the capital, and now here you were getting cables talking of a ruthless campaign of ethnic cleansing and terror. I mean, surely, it wasn't very difficult to realize that this could have been the start of an unfolding genocide.**

...It may not have been very difficult and maybe we made a second mistake, but certainly in the first few days, neither the people on the ground except for that one sentence, or we here, knew that this was a planned genocide. We knew that the plane had crashed, and we thought it was an accident. We knew that fighting had resumed and we all viewed it as a breakdown of the cease-fire.

**Do you think that was a mistake that cost lives?**

Obviously it did. It cost lives, but I'm not sure that it was the mistake itself. ... With all due respect, those who were responsible for the loss of lives were those who had planned the killing. They are responsible for the loss of life. We did not anticipate that this was going to happen. Yes, we made a mistake. We deeply regret it. We failed there. And in the first few days, no, we did not realize this was a genocide. We thought it was the



breakdown of a cease-fire.

**But you did have men on the ground. Why didn't you tell them to open fire to protect civilians?**

The first reaction of the troops on the ground was to try and save whomever they saw in danger. General Dallaire was one of our most courageous commanders, and he did what he could, first to get his own people to safety, naturally, but then to use his armed soldiers to try and protect civilian lives. They did not need any orders for that, they did that automatically.

**Was it within the mandate to open fire to protect civilians?**

Not strictly, but in a situation like this, if they were to have done it nobody would have blamed them.

**So they could have opened fire to protect civilian lives.**

I believe some of them did.

**Well, not very many of them.**

No, not very many, but not because they were told by New York not to fire.

**They appear to have thought that they didn't have permission from New York and ...**

No. We should not mix up things like using offensive operations to recover weapons, and using weapons to protect lives. They're two different things. They did not need instructions from New York. They have their weapons, those weapons are loaded, and ... while lives are threatened, in self-protection or to prevent loss of other life, they could have opened fire. This is in the broad rules of engagement that apply to all peacekeeping operations.

**So you're quite clear that the men on the ground and the force commander did not need to seek permission to open fire to protect civilians?**

Not in those conditions. We can imagine those conditions. It was chaos, people were being killed, they were rampaging ... and it was in Kigali, remember that we were concentrated in Kigali and just near the border, near Uganda. So they did what they could. They shepherded civilians into stadiums, into churches, into schools, they guarded them. And they risked their lives, and if I remember, some lost their lives.

**But the United Nations soldiers on the ground told us that one reason they did not open fire was because they didn't have permission.**

I cannot understand that. I do not recall and as I

said, I was in charge of the operation. I cannot recall a request coming in from the field that [said], "Hell has broken loose around us, can we open fire?" and a cable going back and saying, "Let hell run its course, don't open fire." I do not recall this.

**So why then, did your soldiers, your troops, who were guarding VIPs on that night of April 6th-7th, why did they allow those VIPs to be killed?. For example, Monsieur Lando.**

I'm sorry, but I really cannot recall those circumstances. We know that the main battalion was withdrawn, I believe, on the fourth day or the fifth day. I think we have to remember that this was a completely chaotic situation. We know that ten Belgian soldiers had been killed when they had been surrounded by overwhelming force. In that situation, perhaps, and I'm just speculating, the soldiers who happened to be on duty then found that they could not do anything and that they'd better give up.

**Another example. Over 1,000 refugees took shelter at a United Nations troops compound guarded by Belgian soldiers who then abandoned them, went to the airport, left them to die. How do you feel about that?**

Just as anyone who had any responsibility for this would feel. Terrible, sad, but I was not on the ground, I don't know what the circumstances were. Maybe those Belgian soldiers also realized that resistance was futile. It's quite possible. Maybe you feel that they should have gone down firing and been killed. Well, I do not know whether their commander gave them the order to withdraw, or whether they themselves decided. They certainly didn't telephone New York.

**They told us that their hands were tied, because they, for example, needed the permission--express permission of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, your boss--to fire their heavy machine gun. Is that correct?**

They may have said that. I don't believe so, no. The force commander has very wide authority ... he had sought, in the case of the recovery weapons, to go beyond the mandate where we stopped him, but otherwise he has very wide authority, depending on the situation that develops.

**Were you surprised that General Dallaire was not using force more often to protect civilians?**

When?

**In the first two days.**

I went to Kigali, I went to Rwanda in May, a little

over a month after this happened. I saw our troops, which by then had been reduced from 2,500 to 400, not simply protecting people in schools and stadiums, but sharing their rations with these people because they had no other food. I saw soldiers with just one armored car outside the stadium, nothing else. They were risking their lives, they could have been overpowered. But that was a month later. I was not there. I cannot speak for the soldiers or their commanders who were on the ground. I can only speculate and I have done that already. So take that at face value, as speculation as to what went through their minds, what orders they received, why they acted as they did.

**When you were told by the Security Council to downsize the United Nations troops in Rwanda, in the middle of the genocide, how did you feel?**

The secretary-general presented three options ... the first one to strengthen the mission. More than double it. And I think that it was 5,000 or 5,500. The second was to withdrawal all together, and he clearly recommended against that. He said he preferred the first. But if the first was not to be approved by the council, he said, "Then let us," (because it was still being treated as a breakdown of the cease-fire until a week or two later) "let us leave a mission, a small contingent there, to protect out political presence which will try and reestablish the cease-fire." And the council decided precisely on that and reduced the authorized strength to 270 from 2,500.

**In the Secretariat, you thought it was not the right decision.**

And we come back to the point I made earlier about political will. If the political will was not there when we had this catastrophe before our eyes, I very much doubt, in the shadow of Somalia, whether the political will had been there on the basis of one cable to say, let us increase the force, let us more than double it and give it a peace enforcement mandate, which means risking lives and risking what happened in Somalia. That simply was not going to happen.

I'm sorry, but I have been in this business a bit longer and we knew what the atmosphere was. Both Somalia, with what was going on and Bosnia, and may I just come back to that and speak about preventing genocide, using weapons to prevent loss of life. What happened in Rwanda was a frenzy, a paroxysm of terror which lasted three months. In Bosnia, for 30 years we watched it on television. It is there that ethnic cleansing was born, and we knew what Serb terror was ... do you think information was lacking those 30 years before action was taken? Do you think the capacity was lacking and NATO on the ground, NATO in the air, and NATO on the sea? No, what was lacking was the political will, which was

mustered 30 years later when the situation had reached a level where public opinion would not accept it. And that political will was also lacking in Rwanda.

**You sat there in the Security Council watching the leaders ... do nothing. Why were they so hesitant to help?**

What we call the Somalia Syndrome. What we call the Mogadishu Line. Casualties were not acceptable. Casualties appeared on television screens ... you will recall when the American soldiers were killed and that was simply not acceptable, and so those risks were not to be taken again.

**When the resolution was given to go ahead with what's called UNAMIR II, with a stronger mandate and more troops than UNAMIR, how easy did you find it to get to that force size ...**

Extremely difficult. I believe that was adopted in May. Authorized strength of 5,500. I believe in July we still had 500 on the ground. Certain governments did offer troops, African governments. Those troops ... we could not get them to Rwanda which you must remember is a landlocked country, without the equipment and the equipment had to come from outside. I think it was only August or September that we actually reached near the level.

**By which time the whole thing was over.**

It was all over by the middle of July. It was over because the RPF simply got the upper hand and drove them out.

**During those months of late April and May, you personally had to stand by and watch a genocide unfolding, and were told to do nothing about it. How do you feel about that personally?**

We were all horrified by what was going on the ground. We felt impotent to stop it. We were deeply distressed, yes, but again I must insist that what you are saying is that we should have saved Rwanda from itself, in the words of the secretary-general--it was Rwandese who planned the genocide, it was Rwandese who carried it out. It was Rwandese who, sadly, were the victims. We happened to be there on a peacekeeping mandate. Our mandate was not to anticipate and prevent genocide. Our people on the ground, as I said, they are lightly equipped troops under a very courageous commander did what they could. They did the best they could. They saved lives. When the killing actually started, they could not save every life in Rwanda.

**Could they have saved more?**

Given what they had, I do not believe so. It comes

back to political will. If the political will is there, yes, anything can be done. If the political will is there, troops, APCs and tanks can be airlifted in a matter of two days. This is not to criticize the Security Council. It is understandable that after what had happened just a few months before in Somalia, there was no will to take on another such risk and have more casualties.

[home](#) . [interviews](#) . [100 days of slaughter](#) . [readings](#) . [somalia debacle](#) . [ignored warning](#)  
[discussion](#) . [synopsis](#) . [press](#) . [tapes & transcripts](#)  
[frontline online](#) . [pbs online](#)

New Content **Copyright** © 1999 PBS Online and WGBH/FRONTLINE