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8 September 1994

PRESS BRIEFING BY FORMER UNAMIR FORCE COMMANDER

The former force commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), Major-General Romeo Dallaire, told correspondents at a Headquarters press briefing yesterday that the humanitarian problem was still quite significant.

Major-General Dallaire said that his tour of almost 14 months would end on Friday and that he left Kigali with sadness as he saw the mission enter into a new phase with more resources becoming available at a critical time.

He said that he saw what seemed to be a classic peace-keeping mission turn into a war that subsequently degenerated into genocide and holocaust but was now evolving into a humanitarian effort that, he hoped, would restabilize the country. The United Nations remained present throughout and attempted within the limited scope of its capabilities to assist in restabilizing the situation and in getting the parties to communicate with each other.

He said that his work was one of command but also included assisting the different agencies that had the front-line task of providing humanitarian assistance, he continued. A lot of positive lessons had been learned from working closely throughout the war, and subsequently, with all the different humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organizations.

General Dallaire said that the troops he commanded were from countries that demonstrated determination to see the mission through, and the new troops coming in were demonstrating the same desire to provide the assistance needed for humanitarian protection and support.

A correspondent asked what General Dallaire considered the most successful and least successful parts of the UNAMIR operation while he was in Rwanda. He said the successful element was the force's remaining throughout, even during the war period, although it had been mandated as a peace-keeping force; and that it had tried to effect cease-fires and to make possible humanitarian relief. He said that the limitation of the mission had to do with the difficulty of the United Nations in getting resources in a timely fashion to respond to its mandates. Even though the Organization took decisions to assist countries to come through difficult times, it was exceptionally limited as an entity to be able to influence such situations, because it does not have the troops, equipment and assets readily available to it, as those remained under the control of the Member States. That led to an inability to be timely in responding to very rapidly changing situations.

Asked what his conclusions were about the peace-keeping abilities of the United Nations and whether it would have been possible to halt the bloodshed, Major-General Dallaire said the Rwandese conflict was not an outright ethnic one "but was more of a political decapitation which degenerated into ethnic chaos". It was not all Hutus against all Tutsis, but were elements against

(more)

He said that neither militarily nor politically did UNAMIR have the ability to wipe out or jam the radio station. What was needed was to counteract it.

Asked whether he had a fallback position when he surrounded a hotel with armoured personnel carriers to protect the people there, he said no. He either had to protect the people concerned or pull out but he could not pull out and abandon them, making "a win-win or lose-lose exercise".

He noted that before the Belgians pulled out, they were being specifically targeted, and it was becoming a liability to use them because using them to protect others was putting them at even more risk than the people they were protecting. Their withdrawal did create a significant loss to the UNAMIR force, however, because they held more than half of the operational equipment.

Replying to a question on the decision by the Security Council to scale down UNAMIR, General Dallaire said he was part of the decision to pull the troops out, explaining that if he could not get the capabilities to influence the peace process, the forces could not simply sit their waiting for the next mortar round to come down. To be able to be successful, the proper mandate was needed together with the resources and trained troops.

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