

Rwanda 1994: « ...kill as many people as you want, you cannot kill their memory »

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Aegis, 29 mars 2004

Speech by Philippe Gaillard, head of the ICRC's delegation in Rwanda, 1993-1994, given at the Genocide Prevention Conference, London, January 2002, organized by the Aegis Trust and the UK Foreign Office

« *Die Sprache spricht als das Geläute der Stille* »
(Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*)

In 1994, before, during and after the genocide during which around one million people were killed, most of them civilians, I gave hundreds of interviews, reports, conferences to all kind of audiences, newspapers, TV, radios and the general public. And afterwards I think this was not only the right action to take but also the right therapy.

At the end of 1994, I decided not to talk any more about the Rwandan genocide and declined all the invitations I was receiving about it. I just wanted to go back to silence and to invisibility as it suits an ICRC delegate and because of my rather shy and discreet personality.

Almost 8 years have gone since the genocide was committed and by being here I am once again talking about it. Not because I am less shy today than 8 years ago, not because I need to be visible again – I wish I were never visible again – but because I still have some kind of debt, or better to say, some kind of duty towards all those who died in Rwanda in 1994 and who were given so little attention later on that some of us think that the Rwandan genocide can be considered as a “case study”.

For those who died and especially for those who survived, it is certainly not and it will never be a “case study”.

It is because of them that I am here today. You may

kill as many people as you want or as you can. You cannot kill their memory. The memory is the most invisible and resistant material you can find on the earth. You cannot cut it like diamond, you cannot shoot at it because you cannot see it, nevertheless it is everywhere, all around you, plenty of silence, unsaid suffering, whispers, absent looks. Sometimes you can smell it and then the memory clearly speaks like the whisper of silence. Sometimes the smell is still unbearable, even when things have been forgotten for decades.

Prevention, neutrality and reporting

In July 1993, two weeks before the Arusha peace agreement was signed by President Habyarimana and Alexis Kanyarengwe, we met President Habyarimana. When we talked about the danger of anti-personnel mines on the front line, President Habyarimana told us he was fully aware of it, but added : « *The main danger is actually that the hearts and minds of the Rwandan people are mined* ». This was a “preventive” message.

One month later, after the Arusha peace agreement had been signed, I met the President of the MRND, the governmental party, Mathieu Ndirumpatse, and asked his opinion about the very recent peace agreement. He told me the following : « *Sir, don't believe too much in it... In Africa peace agreements are too often just scraps of paper* ». Just another message of “prevention”.

A couple of weeks later, around 50 civilians were killed in the demilitarised zone monitored by the UN troops led by General Romeo Dallaire. Immediately

a very aggressive campaign was launched against General Dallaire by the *Radio-Television Libre des Mille Collines* accusing him in a very cynical way not to be able to identify and punish the responsible people for the killings. Another message of “prevention” by provoking people against the UN peacekeeping forces.

In January 1994, the situation in Kigali was very tense. So it was in February when one Minister, Félicien Katawasi [Gatabazi], and the President of the extremist party CDR, Martin Bouchiana [Bucyana], were killed.

Sporadic fighting in the north

Then the dialogue between the Government and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) stopped. Sporadic fighting took place in the northern part of the country.

Just before Easter, the Dean of the diplomatic corps convoked me. He advised me to be on the alert for something bad could happen very soon. Prevention. I asked all my people not to leave the town.

As Christoph Plate says : « *It is not until war breaks out or famine is rife or there is a massacre that people begin to wonder what caused it. The period prior to the disaster then becomes a news item or a background story. Reports in the media can indeed influence conflicts, but they can hardly ever prevent them* » (*Journalists' reports cannot prevent conflict* in International Review of the Red Cross, No 839, p. 617-624, 30 September 2000).

The Rwandan genocide was so well covered by the media, especially by the western media, that everyone could follow it on TV, radio or in newspapers every day. One could say that it was transmitted live, at least live enough to inform the governments and public about what was really happening there.

ICRC speaks of “systematic carnage”

The ICRC contributed to this media coverage and reporting like it may be never had done in its almost 130 years of existence at that time. On 28 April 1994, some three weeks after the beginning of the genocide, the ICRC called on the governments concerned including all members of the Security Council to take all

possible measures to put an end to the massacres. The words used – « *systematic carnage* », « *the extermination of a significant portion of the civilian population* » – left no room for doubt about what was going on.

« *After half a million, sir, we stopped counting...* »

At the same time, BBC London called us in Kigali and asked us what our estimate of the number of people killed was. We said at least 250,000. One week later they called again. We said at least 500,000. And once again the following week. And then we said : « *After half a million, sir, we stopped counting* ». We were never asked the same question again.

At the beginning of May, I was invited by General Romeo Dallaire to meet with the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ambassador José Ayala Lasso. When we came to figures, I was told I was exaggerating.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to General Dallaire’s courage, actions and always helpful pieces of advice. He saved many lives, among them that of our medical coordinator who had been hit by shrapnel of a rocket launched by the RPF on an ICRC convoy on its way from Kigali to Gitarama on 19 May.

Massacred in a Red Cross ambulance

Prevention : zero. Reporting : ineffective. Maybe with one exception : on 14 April, in the presence of the Rwandan armed forces, militiamen killed six wounded civilians who were on their way to our hospital in a Red Cross ambulance. The *Radio-Television Libre des Mille Collines* announced that the Red Cross was transporting « *enemies of the Republic disguised as fake wounded* ».

Explanations, protests, at our request the ICRC headquarters issued a strong press release which was immediately broadcast everywhere by the BBC and *Radio France Internationale*, among others, boomerang effect on the field, new explanations, the Rwandan Government and media became aware of the considerable deterioration of their image, corrections, awareness campaign on the right of the wounded to be taken care of and on the role of the Red Cross... Some kind of test : we could have been killed for that

statement but we were not and the Red Cross ambulances could restart their work without problems.

The killing of six wounded people allowed us to save thousands of others, 9,000 altogether between April and July according to the statistics of our makeshift hospital. Speaking out is always dangerous in such situations, exceptionally it may be effective.

"How can you be neutral in front of genocide?"

Neutrality : THE key point. Many of you will ask : how can you be neutral in front of genocide? Of course you cannot be neutral in front of genocide. But the genocide is happening in front of your eyes every day. It is a fact. As a Red Cross worker, you really don't have the political – not to mention the military – means to stop it. All you can try to do is to save what can be saved, leftovers, wounded, and when I say wounded, maybe I am wrong, I should say people not finished off by machetes or screwdrivers. And it was really the case during the first weeks when we were evacuating wounded people – all of them Tutsis – to our hospital.

And that is when problems start. Humanitarian neutrality means first to be on the side of the victims, of ALL the victims. But when the victims belong to the same category, then their executioners start to look at you with suspicion. This must have been the reason why, after having given a very difficult interview to the Rwandan National Radio, the *Radio-Television Libre des Mille Collines* started to broadcast that I was without doubt a Belgian national, which was simply a death sentence.

I was talking with the government authorities in Gitarama when I was informed about that. I immediately asked them to call the *Radio-Television libre des Mille Collines* and to ask it to correct its declaration. They did it in a very efficient – although not very elegant – way, by broadcasting that I « *was too courageous and too clever to be a Belgian national* ».

Mixed population at the hospital

A couple of days later, the *Radio-Television libre des Mille Collines* was targeted by the RPF. One of

their most famous announcers, Noël, was badly injured in one of his feet and was brought to our hospital... I felt on the safe side : our hospital just started to have a mixed population and this trend increased continuously in the following weeks when wounded militiamen and members of the armed forces had no other place to go to be taken care of but our poor makeshift hospital, which became some kind of a sacred place, a strong symbol and demonstration of neutrality.

In mid-April, the new Prime Minister, Jean Kambanda, asked us to evacuate the dead bodies from the streets of Kigali. I refused, asking to stop the killings first. Then the authorities decided to use the common law prisoners to evacuate the bodies, but they had no fuel for the trucks. We gave them the fuel. I learned a couple of days later that they evacuated 67,000 bodies from the streets of Kigali, a town with 200,000 inhabitants before 6 April.

Later on, because of the lack of chlorine and aluminium sulfate, Kigali was left without water. We provided the necessary products and could thus postpone the death throes of the central pumping station. And so on. These humanitarian gestures were duly appreciated.

One millimetre of humanity

This might explain why – at our request – the Minister of Labour and Social Welfare, Jean de Dieu Habimeza, went personally to an orphanage close to Gisenyi and, with the full support of the Rwandan armed forces, saved 300 children of a certain slaughter by the militiamen; it could also explain why 35,000 people could survive in Kabgayi, another 8,000 in Nyarushishi camp, the only survivors of the prefecture of Cyangugu; why another 600 orphans in Butare. And so on. Maybe 70,000 people all together, just one millimetre of humanity out of kilometres of horrors and unspeakable suffering.

The most incredible event I personally witnessed happened at the very beginning of July, just before the RPF took over Kigali : six heavily-armed militiamen came to our hospital. They were drunk, but surprisingly not aggressive at all; they had one prisoner, a young Tutsi lady; they told me : « *This woman*

has been with us for the past three months, she is a nurse, we are about to leave the town, we have decided not to kill her despite the fact that she is a Tutsi, as a nurse she will be more useful in your hospital than dead... »

I never received a better acknowledgment of the efficiency of neutrality.

War is destruction, negation of life. Humanitarian action works within this subtraction. It tries to reduce it. In case of a genocide, it may seem a stupid gamble, since it's well-known that genocidal logic is the complete negation of the humanitarian spirit and of the law.

Whenever you can reduce this negation it is a miracle. And the memory never forgets miracles.