



ADST-DACOR Diplomats and Diplomacy Series

Series Editor

Margery Boichel Thompson

Since 1776, extraordinary men and women have represented the United States abroad under widely varying circumstances. What they did and how and why they did it remain little known to their compatriots. In 1995, the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST) and DACOR, an organization of foreign affairs professionals, created the Diplomats and Diplomacy book series to increase public knowledge and appreciation of the professionalism of American diplomats and their involvement in world history. In this sixty-ninth series volume career diplomat Joyce E. Leader analyzes the failed diplomatic efforts to achieve democracy and peace in Rwanda as the country careened along the path to genocide.

FROM HOPE TO HORROR

DIPLOMACY AND THE MAKING OF THE RWANDA GENOCIDE

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A Weekend Respite

During the first weekend in April, I enjoyed a respite not only from our spate of Washington visitors but also from the stress of physical insecurity. It was Easter weekend. Both Good Friday and Easter Monday were holidays, so I took advantage of the four-day weekend to have a new adventure in Rwanda. With a camping-enthusiast friend and her visiting sister and ten-year-old nephew, I went on a two-night camping trip to the Nyungwe National Park in the mountainous rain forest of southwest Rwanda. The road leading west to the park from the southern town of Butare was a vast improvement over the one I had traveled fifteen years or so earlier.

Back then I was the U.S. Peace Corps associate director responsible for approximately one hundred education volunteers in Zaire and for several others teaching in Rwanda at the university in Butare. I vividly remember a harrowing trip from Butare to Bukavu, site of the Peace Corps training program in Zaire. A narrow, rocky road wound through the mountains and across barren mountain ridges. Local Rwandan villagers milling along the roadside scattered rapidly, with fear in their eyes, as our Land Rover raced by. We were trying to reach the border before it closed at nightfall, the driver had calmly explained.

This time we drove an expertly engineered, wide, paved, two-lane road, banked appropriately to the mountainous terrain with guardrails as needed for physical security. What a glorious change! We seemed to be the only visitors in the Nyungwe National Park that weekend. We found a lovely, flat place in the densely forested hills to pitch our tents, and well-kept paths offered us several hiking opportunities during our stay. What a feeling of peace and serenity!

We returned to Kigali on Easter Monday, in time to attend a reception hosted by the Senegalese troops in UNAMIR to celebrate their national day. The Senegalese seemed to have invited everyone they knew to the festivities. Their UNAMIR officers and fellow soldiers, the diplomatic community, international and local NGO leaders were all gathered together. The magnificent food included one of my favorites, chicken yassa, a dish covered with caramelized onions

and lime juice. The steady rhythm of West African music blared over loudspeakers, prompting many people to dance.

Only when the inevitable speeches began was I jolted back to reality as I pointed out high-level Rwandans to Ambassador Rawson, who had not yet met all of the key players. I remember calling Rawson's attention to one Rwandan military officer in particular, Col. Théoneste Bagosora, the chief of staff at the ministry who had been a hard-line government delegate at the Arusha talks. I told Rawson that Bagosora was known among the observers at Arusha as "Colonel Death."

Another Visitor Arrives to Explore Refugee Issues

The next day, April 5, I welcomed to Kigali the U.S. Department of State's regional refugee officer, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who was based at the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi. She had come to Rwanda to monitor the situation of the recently arrived refugees from Burundi in the south and to learn about Rwanda's plans for the impending return of Tutsi refugees from neighboring countries in the wake of the peace agreement. Linda and I knew each other well from our days in the political section of the U.S. Embassy in Lagos, Nigeria, about eight years earlier. She would be my houseguest during her visit.

On the following day, Wednesday, April 6, we made several calls on government and UN officials concerned with refugee issues. Our last call was on Jacques Bihozagara of the RPF, who would be responsible for refugee resettlement in the forthcoming transitional cabinet. We met him in the national assembly building, where the RPF security contingent had taken up residence at the end of December pending installation of the transitional government. During that meeting Bihozagara informed Linda and me that many Tutsi refugees had in fact already returned from their many years in exile in Uganda. They were settling in the RPF-controlled territory just inside the Rwandan border. We discussed my traveling with him in the near future to check on the condition of these spontaneous returnees. He and I agreed to fix a specific date for the trip in the coming days.

Etched in my mind from that visit is the stunning view that lay before us as we stepped outside the national assembly building. The

day was sunny and warm. The late afternoon air was crystal clear. The sky was deep, deep blue. As Linda and I looked out across the valleys from the highest hill in the city, we could see small, tin-roofed homes in neighborhoods below us. Roads wound down one hill and up another to the center of town. On the valley floor was the stream where young men were often busy washing cars. On a hilltop opposite us stood government buildings and the homes of Rwandans and some diplomats. We paused for several minutes, admiring the view and appreciating the beauty of Kigali. How could there not be hope for Rwanda, I thought. No one we had talked with and nothing we had seen that day gave us any hint of the tragedy that would begin to unfold within hours of this blissful moment.

A Plane Crash

That evening the representative of the UN refugee agency, Carlos Rodriguez, and one of his colleagues joined Linda and me for dinner at my house. We wanted to discuss the refugee issues facing UNHCR in Rwanda and the region in greater depth than we had at his office earlier in the day. At about 8:30, while we were at the table, we heard a distant but distinct explosion but continued talking and eating. Loud noises and explosions weren't entirely without precedent; it was likely another grenade assault on an unfortunate robbery victim.

We couldn't have been more wrong. About half an hour later Ambassador Rawson telephoned to say that the noise had been an airplane crash near the airport. President Habyarimana's plane had gone down. He had been returning from a meeting in Tanzania about impending conflict in Burundi. The president's condition and that of others on the plane was not yet known. Nor was there an explanation for the crash. Our dinner party ended abruptly. My UNHCR guests left agitated and worried. Linda and I were anxious. We wondered what it would mean if the president were dead.

A couple of hours later the ambassador phoned again. UNAMIR sources had confirmed that all aboard the plane were dead: President Habyarimana, President Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi, close aides of both, and the entire French crew of the plane. UNAMIR also confirmed that the plane had been shot out of the air by an unidentified missile.

I was charged with drafting the message to the American community. After the ambassador approved the message, consular officer Laura Lane and I used our radio network—in accordance with emergency procedures—to notify the American community in Kigali and elsewhere in Rwanda of the situation. Our message alerted all Americans, both official and nonofficial, to the plane crash, told them that the president and all others aboard were confirmed dead, and advised that they remain indoors while awaiting further instructions.

Comment

Responsibility for shooting down the president's plane has never been definitively determined. Both hard-liners in the government and the RPF had plausible motives. The extremists may have thought that eliminating the president would be the only way to stop implementation of the Arusha Peace Accords and prevent the power-sharing provisions from going forward. The RPF may have thought that removing the president would remove the major obstacle to implementation of the pact that would give them a considerable role in governing Rwanda. Alternatively it could have been a gamble by one side or the other to take over the peace process and scrap the power-sharing arrangement called for in the Accords. Whether either side had the expertise or the means to shoot down the plane was not clear. Whether anyone was still committed to power sharing was doubtful.

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The Exodus

Anxiety Abounds

After receiving the shocking news of the plane crash that killed the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi as well as senior aides and scrambling to alert the American community, I was exhausted. However, my day was not yet over. Into the night Rwandan friends telephoned to say how afraid they were of what might happen next. One, a human rights advocate, was convinced that her life was in danger. She wanted me to have the UNAMIR troops come to her house, not far from their headquarters, and take her to safety. She said she had telephoned them, but the English-speaking Bangladeshi who answered the phone could not understand her French. A journalist who phoned predicted the situation was bound to deteriorate rapidly. I tried, naively, to reassure both of them but persuaded neither. After a long day I fell into an uneasy sleep.

The next morning my house guest, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the regional refugee officer from the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, and I were awakened at 5:00 by gunfire very close to the house. Soon it was clear to us that there was shooting throughout the city. By 7:30 I had received two telephone calls reporting systematic, house-to-house killing of Tutsi in a community across the road and down the hillside from the national assembly building, where the RPF troops were quartered. Was this arbitrary killing of innocent Tutsi intended

to draw the RPF forces out of their lodging and into a fight? By 8:00 two more calls confirmed that political party leaders—both Tutsi and opposition Hutu—were being killed or taken away by the military. One of the first persons killed, I was told, was the young Hutu cabinet director at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He had been killed in his house shortly after midnight. I remembered him as the person who used to hold court almost every evening in a local outdoor fish restaurant where I sometimes ate with American colleagues.

Such violence was not new, but it had never occurred so systematically and with such intensity in Kigali itself. Even the February violence six weeks earlier, following the assassination of PSD and CDR leaders, lacked the sense of organization that was clearly apparent now. Although the actions appeared to be in retaliation for the death of President Habyarimana, it seemed to be something much more. Authority, to the extent that anyone was in charge, was clearly in the hands of the political hard-liners and extremists, and they were wreaking havoc on those they defined as their enemies.

At 8:15 my next-door neighbor, Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana, telephoned to ask whether she could come over the wall between our two houses to seek safety. I agreed. However, when the blue beret of a Ghanaian UNAMIR trooper apparently charged with organizing this transfer became visible at the top of the wall, shots were fired that seemed to be coming from just outside the gate at the foot of my garden. I surmised that whoever was outside my house with a gun must have been watching the wall to keep the prime minister from slipping away and had spotted the peacekeeper. I told the UNAMIR soldier that we should abandon the attempt, as my house could no longer be considered a safe haven for the prime minister. She would have to look elsewhere. Reluctantly he agreed.

An hour later my day guard advised me of a commotion outside my gate. Presidential guard troops, with their distinctive black berets, were attempting to break down my gate to get inside. They evidently wanted to search for the prime minister, whom they believed had come over the wall and into my house. In order to keep them from breaking down the gate and because I thought I had nothing to hide, I let them in—about fourteen of them.

I was startled when several angrily approached my house guest, a

tall, dark-skinned African American. They insisted, in French, that she was a Tutsi. She didn't understand French but knew exactly what they were talking about. We both vehemently denied she was Tutsi, insisting, in French, over and over again that she was an American diplomat visiting from our Nairobi embassy. She produced her passport and desperately waved it in front of her. Eventually, after much shouting—and after seeing her passport—they accepted that she was American and left her alone.

Badly shaken, Linda sat in my front hall holding my four-month-old puppy, Coco, on a short leash while the Black Berets spent more than an hour searching outside and inside my modest, one-level house, including in the space above the ceiling. I kept up a steady barrage of conversation with the soldiers gathered in my kitchen, urging them to go outside while their colleague searched the house, assuring them that the prime minister was not there. Instead, apparently to underscore an order to put the phone down, one of them fired off a couple shots. Of course, I immediately laid the receiver down, but beside the phone so the person on the other end—whoever it was—would hear what was happening. I later learned it was the human rights activist and former Kigali prosecutor Alphonse Nkubito.

Finally the soldier who had climbed into the space above the ceiling to look for the prime minister came to tell me that she was not there. I reminded him that I'd been telling him that all along. So, now that he was convinced, would he please go tell his superiors so they could leave us alone? The soldiers did leave, but not before finding and beating my gardener, Jonathan, a Tutsi who had locked himself in the kitchen pantry. Fortunately, though terribly shaken, he had not sustained any physical injuries or, worse, been killed. At least the soldiers had arrived early in the day and weren't yet drunk or high on drugs.

Half an hour later Linda and I heard a volley of shots and a woman's scream. Then male voices were cheering. We knew immediately that the prime minister had been found and killed. I felt numb. Later I learned that the ten Belgian UN troops that General Dallaire had sent to protect the prime minister never made it to her house. They had been captured en route and taken to a nearby military camp, where they were brutally tortured and killed.

At about the same time, I spoke by phone to an American who worked as a translator for UNAMIR. He confirmed that UNAMIR troops were still under orders not to fire unless fired upon and were stymied in their attempts to get past roadblocks to reach people who needed their assistance. This echoed the situation six weeks earlier, when UNAMIR's rules of engagement had rendered its troops unable to help or protect civilians cut off by militia roadblocks during the four days of terror.

I spent the rest of the day on the telephone, responding to queries from State Department officials in Washington, comparing notes with local diplomats, and gathering information from Rwandan friends and contacts. I reported regularly to the ambassador and to the American community through our radio net. Linda had somehow managed to defrost two turkeys she found in my freezer and cooked them both so that we would have something to eat as long as we were at the house, and something to take with us should we move to the embassy or be ordered to evacuate. These turkeys were to become a lifesaver for us and others.

By afternoon we heard reports that a number of key political opposition figures had been murdered. Topping the list was my neighbor, Hutu prime minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana from the Twagiramungu faction of the opposition MDR party. Former Hutu foreign minister Boniface Ngulinzira had reportedly been killed in the early hours of the morning. His leadership of the government delegation at the peace talks in Arusha had infuriated Kigali hard-liners and extremists in the MRND and CDR. They held him responsible for giving away too much power to the Tutsi-led RPF. Ngulinzira had sought refuge at a secondary school run by a religious group before being found and killed. The PSD minister of agriculture Frédéric Nzamurambaho and his colleague, Félicien Ngango, vice president of the party, were both reported dead. Ngango had been designated to lead the Transitional National Assembly. Their party had never wavered in its support for power sharing with the RPF.

The PL minister of labor and social affairs, Landoald Ndasingwa, who had led the Tutsi faction of the PL, his Canadian wife, Helen, and their two teenage children had been brutally slain in their home that fateful night. I had last seen him a week or so earlier at a dinner

at the ambassador's residence for one of our visiting officials. As he approached the door at the end of the evening, Lando spoke what would be his last words to me. He took my hands in his and said with a warm, friendly smile that filled his face and lit up his eyes, "My friend, my friend." Tears still come to my eyes when I think about that moment and recall all the Rwandan talent lost to genocide.

My phone kept ringing. Contacts recounted continuing, systematic killing of Tutsis throughout the afternoon. I was told that military troops were still going house to house seeking Tutsi and Hutu "enemies" in several Kigali neighborhoods. People—mostly Tutsi—were seeking refuge in churches in Kigali. Reports came in of killing occurring also in the north and east of the country. The staff at an American-run Seventh Day Adventist school in the northwest of the country called to say that civilians—probably Interahamwe militia—had entered the campus that morning and killed Tutsi students. A Tutsi judge from the eastern town of Kibungo phoned to tell me that civilian groups he identified as "probably militia" were destroying street lamps, likely intending to take advantage of the cover of darkness to begin killing. I never heard from him again.

We got word that two hundred of the six hundred RPF troops had left the national assembly building under UNAMIR escort. Where they were taken, I do not know. Later information suggested that the RPF forces in Kigali had actually broken out of their lodging—some reports claimed they had constructed a warren of tunnels under the building for just such an eventuality—and were fighting the militia and military. Other reports indicated that RPF troops were beginning to move south toward Kigali from their base at Mulindi in the north. Whatever the facts, a resumption of war seemed imminent.

I relayed all the information coming to me from Rwandan and international colleagues to the ambassador, who was stranded at his hilltop residence in a distant part of town. I talked frequently with State Department colleagues in Washington, where a task force had been set up to monitor the deteriorating security situation in Rwanda in the wake of the downing of the president's plane. Through our emergency contact system that depended on telephones and our two-way radios, we kept all Americans aware of what we knew and

advised them to continue staying at home. They shared valuable information and insights with us as well.

As night fell, Linda, Jonathan, and I gathered in the only interior hallway in the house, away from windows and stray bullets. The space, wedged between my bedroom, a second, unfurnished bedroom, and a guest bath, was not much bigger than eight by ten feet. I stretched my phone cord as far as it would go from my bedroom and was able to set up my office there as well. My puppy, Coco, who usually spent nights in the guardhouse at my gate, joined us. I had brought her inside early that morning, even before the Black Berets arrived. I remember vividly a shot ringing out once when Coco ventured into the garden to do her business. Startled by the sound, she came racing across the yard, bounded up the steps to the screened-in porch, and slid across the tile floor, paws spread, into the safety of the house.

Though a bit uncomfortable crammed into the hallway, all four of us were able to get some much-needed sleep. Only twenty-four hours after the president's plane had been shot out of the sky, our lives and the lives of all Rwandans had completely changed. What, I wondered, would the new day bring?

The State Department Orders Evacuation

American community members spent a terrifying Thursday night huddled in their homes listening to gunfire echoing through the Kigali hills. Americans living in the neighborhood known as Kimihurura—on the hill across the valley from the embassy and my house—reported hearing what they believed to be an exchange of fire over their heads between military units based on different sides of the hill. Could one of the Rwandan military units have been challenging another? I never heard any explanation for this event.

I had spent most of Thursday night and into Friday morning on the telephone with Washington. When morning came, gunfire still resonated around my home. I was reluctant to get into my small Toyota Land Cruiser and venture out of my compound as long as I could hear gunfire outside my gate. I suspected road blocks had been erected just outside because of the military school across the road from my house, and the military base not far away.