

Ten Years Later

Human Rights Watch, 2004

The Rwandan genocide of 1994 was one of the defining events of the twentieth century. It ended the illusion that the evil of genocide had been eradicated and spurred renewed commitment to halting genocides in the future.

For Rwandans, whether inside the country or abroad, the consequences of the genocide are direct and tangible. They struggle daily to heal broken bodies and traumatized psyches, to seek justice, and to recreate trust among themselves. Yet the consequences of this genocide, enormous as they are for Rwandans, do not stop at the border of that one small country but spill onto the people of neighboring countries and far beyond. Those living in the region have suffered from subsequent wars of unimaginable cruelty and from the consequences of millions of people in flight, both refugees and killers. Those further from Rwanda pay the price of their failure to protect others, both in guilty consciences and in the material costs of humanitarian aid and assistance in rebuilding shattered societies.

The Rwandan genocide forced us to confront the massive killing of civilians in a way we had not done for fifty years. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, we had seen ordinary people deliberately slain in many conflicts, but not since the Holocaust had we seen civilians massacred so rapidly, so systematically, and with such a blatantly genocidal objective. And yet national governments and international institutions refused to intervene, backing away from a crisis that was politically complex but morally simple.

As the extent of the catastrophe became increasingly clear, the international community was forced to reconsider its ideas and practices in the realm of international justice and in the protection of civilians in times of conflict. Through these changes international institutions may regain some

of the credibility lost by their inaction during the genocide.

In 1994, the United Nations Security Council established the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda to judge those who had once been permitted to kill without hindrance. By doing so, it sought to provide justice for the crimes of the immediate past and also spurred the development of judicial precedents for the prosecuting genocides of the future, no longer unimaginable as they had been a year before. Eight years later, the International Criminal Court was created to sanction and hopefully to deter genocide as well as other grave violations of international humanitarian law. In addition, several governments adopted laws permitting prosecution of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity in their own courts. Belgium and Switzerland prosecuted and convicted persons accused of genocide and war crimes in Rwanda in 1994 and at least two other countries are investigating such crimes and may prosecute them.

Conscious of their own culpability for not halting the genocide, many national and international leaders apologized to the Rwandan people. The UN and the Organization of African Unity as well as the French National Assembly and the Belgian Senate held inquiries about the 1994 events, hoping that understanding the past would make it easier to prevent such tragedies in the future. Unwilling to confront its own responsibility, the United States did not investigate its past record but instead funded social scientists to develop models to predict when and where genocides might occur in the future.

But foreseeing catastrophe does no good without the will to act and a strategy for action. Recognizing this, an international commission under Canadian leadership examined the responsibility to protect and sought to determine when that responsibility would require states to act against another that was putting its own citizens at grievous risk. The Security Council too has focused on the protection of civilians, particularly women and children, in conflict situations, increasingly acknowledging that such protection is central to its responsibility for the management of peace and security around the world. In 2001 a deputy secretary-general of the United Nations told the Security Council that the protection of civilians must become a regular and central aspect of United Nations peace operations, and that this must be made clear in their mandates.¹ How different from 1994 when the Security Council was warned that protection of civilians in Rwanda would be costly and might be an inappropriate activity for a peace-keeping force.

1. United Nations, Press Release, DSG/SM/129, SC/7051, 23/04/2001.

At a meeting in Sweden in 2004 where delegates of various states renewed their pledges to prevent and halt genocide, the UN Secretary General proposed establishing a post of special rapporteur to bring information on possible genocides to the Security Council. Recommendations from such a special rapporteur could serve as the mechanism to trigger UN intervention.

More promising than all the reports and pronouncements have been the cases where international actors intervened to stop the killing of civilians. In 2003 UN peacekeepers in Ituri, in the northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo, proved unable to prevent ethnically-based killing of civilians. As in Rwanda in 1994, the UN troops were too few and their mandate too restricted to permit effective action. But rather than turn away from the situation as they had before, European nations sent in a European Union force under French leadership. These troops secured the main town, providing a safe haven for the threatened, until a stronger UN force with a more robust mandate arrived to replace them.

If the Rwanda genocide had positive consequences elsewhere in spurring action to avert genocide, its impact in Rwanda and the surrounding region has been devastatingly negative. Since 1994 there has been widespread conflict in central Africa : a serious uprising in northwestern Rwanda, two major wars in the neighboring Congo and ten years of civil war in Burundi. In all nearly four million civilians have likely died as a direct or indirect result of military activity in the region since 1994. The genocide has cast its shadow over all these conflicts, spinning actors in directions they would not otherwise have taken and coloring the analysis of events by the international community. Both local and international actors claim genocide or the need to prevent genocide to cover other political and economic objectives. In local Congolese conflicts, such as that in Ituri, contenders seeking foreign support charge each other with genocide, an accusation that would not have been made before 1994.

The Rwandan genocide was intertwined with the war between the government and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Even after the RPF victory in July 1994, the victors and losers could not behave like parties in any ordinary war : neither side could shake loose from the genocide. The defeated officials and officers who had led the killing campaign had convinced themselves and those under their sway that the Tutsi were an enemy to fight to the death. They could not consider living in a Rwanda ruled by the Tutsi-dominated RPF. They knew too that most of the world believed them guilty of genocide and they feared being punished for their crimes if they remained

in Rwanda. The RPF well understood the threat posed by the former authorities and were equally determined to eliminate the rest of their forces. Sure of their moral high ground, the RPF would also continue to refuse dealings with opposition movements abroad, grouping them all with the authorities responsible for the genocide.

The Rwandan genocide influenced significantly the nature and intensity of two subsequent wars in the Congo. One of these wars ousted Sese Seko Mobutu, one of the longest-reigning dictators in Africa, and opened the way for Rwanda to establish its influence over Congolese politics, an influence that continues today, welcomed by some but unwelcome to most Congolese.

In mid-1994 officials of the former government, soldiers, and militia fled to the Congo, leading more than a million Rwandans into exile. They carried with them their ideology of Hutu supremacy and many of their weapons. They sought the support of local Congolese people as well as of the government, hoping to broaden their base for continued resistance against the RPF. They insisted that Rwandan Hutu and different Congolese groups were a single Bantu people because they spoke similar languages and shared some cultural traits. They said Tutsi were "Nilotic" invaders who, together with the related Hima people of Uganda, intended to subjugate the Bantu inhabitants. This "Bantu" ideology and the RPF determination to counter it formed the framework for much of the military conflict in the region for the next ten years.

In 1996 Rwanda and Uganda, led by President Yoweri Museveni, invaded the Congo. Rwanda wanted to eliminate any possible threat from the former Rwandan army and militia who were re-organizing and re-arming in refugee camps in eastern Congo. Uganda sought greater political influence and control over resources in the region. Together with their Congolese allies, the Rwandan and Ugandan troops moved rapidly westward, at first hunting down the remnants of the Rwandan Hutu from the refugee camps combatants and civilians alike but then setting another objective, that of overturning Mobutu and his government. They succeeded, but in 1998 the new Congolese government, led by Laurent Desire Kabila, turned against its former supporters. Kabila told the Rwandan and Ugandan troops to go home, thus provoking a new war. This second Congo war at one point involved seven African nations and a host of rebel movements and other local armed groups, all fighting to control the territory and vast wealth of the Congo. Casualties among civilians were enormous, from lack of food, medical care, and clean water as well as from direct attack by the various forces.

The real nature of this war, like that of the first, was for a long time disguised by the references to the genocide. In demanding a return to national sovereignty Congolese officials spoke in anti-Tutsi language and crowds in Kinshasa killed Tutsi on the streets. Rwanda sought to justify making war by claiming the need to eliminate perpetrators of the genocide who were operating in eastern Congo with the support of the Congolese government. Rwandan authorities continued to stress this supposed security threat from the other side of the border long after the numbers and resources of the former Rwandan army and militia had diminished and their members were widely scattered.

In 1997 and 1998, in the hiatus between the two Congo wars, soldiers and militia of the genocidal government, supported by thousands of new recruits, crossed from the Congo and led an insurrection in northwestern Rwanda. The RPF forces suppressed the rebellion at the cost of tens of thousands of lives, many of them civilians who happened to live in the area. A substantial number of the rebel combatants had not taken part in the genocide and seemed more focused on overturning the government than on hunting down Tutsi civilians, but others continued to harbor genocidal intentions and singled out Tutsi to be attacked and killed.

Events in Burundi, a virtual twin to Rwanda in demographic terms, first influenced and then were influenced by the Rwandan genocide. Burundi was already immersed in its own crisis with widespread ethnic slaughter in late 1993. These killings, as well as international indifference to them, spurred genocidal planning in Rwanda. After April 1994 Burundians viewed with horror the massacres of others of their own ethnic group in Rwanda, Tutsi identifying with victims of the genocide and Hutu identifying with those killed by RPF forces. Burundian Tutsi and Hutu feared and distrusted each other more because of the slaughter in Rwanda and each group vowed that its members would not be the next victims. Former Rwandan soldiers and militia at times joined Burundian Hutu rebel forces, bringing them military expertise and reinforcing their anti-Tutsi ideas. RPF soldiers on occasion came south to help the Burundian army prevent a victory by Hutu rebels.

Within Rwanda the RPF used the pretext of preventing a recurrence of genocide to suppress the political opposition, refusing to allow dissidents to organize new political parties and eliminating an existing party that could potentially have challenged the RPF in national elections. Authorities jailed dissidents and drove others into exile on charges of divisionism, equated to an incipient form of genocidal thinking even when opponents sought

to construct parties that included Tutsi as well as Hutu. During 2003, under RPF leadership, Rwandans adopted a new constitution that enshrined a vague prohibition of divisionism and made liberties of speech, press, and association subject to regulation and possible limitation by ordinary law. In presidential and legislative elections, the RPF came close to asserting that a vote for others was a vote for genocide past or future. With such a campaign theme and with a combination of intimidation and fraud, the RPF re-affirmed its dominance of political life.

In the years just after the end of the genocide, many international leaders supported the RPF as if hoping thus to compensate for their failure to protect Tutsi during the genocide. Even when confronted with evidence of widespread and systematic killing of civilians by RPF soldiers in Rwanda and in the Congo, most hesitated to criticize these abuses. Not only did they see the RPF as the force that had ended the genocide but they also saw all opponents of the RPF as likely to be perpetrators of genocide, an assessment that was not accurate either in 1994 or later. So long as the parties were defined this way, international leaders acquiesced in or even actively supported the RPF activities in the Congo. Similarly international actors frequently tolerated RPF limits on civil and political freedom inside Rwanda, readily conceding the RPF argument that the post-genocidal context justified restrictions on the usual liberties.

As the ten years after the genocide drew to a close, the international community moderated its support of the current Rwandan government and exerted considerable pressure to obtain withdrawal of its troops from the Congo. Some international leaders began to question the tight RPF control within Rwanda; diplomats and election observers from the European Union and the United States noted abuses of human rights that marred the 2003 elections. Despite these signs of growing international concern, the RPF-led government appeared firmly seated for the near future. Whether it will be able to assure long-term stability and genuine reconciliation may depend on its ability to distinguish between legitimate dissent and the warning signs of another genocide.

Human Rights Watch reissues this book substantially the same as the original printing to ensure that a detailed history of the genocide remains available to readers. Since its first publication in English and French, the book has appeared in German and will shortly be published in Kinyarwanda, the language of Rwanda. The horrors recorded here must remain alive in our heads and hearts; only in that way can we hope to resist the next wave of

evil.