

RWANDA-US:

Papers Imply Hutu Hard-Liners Downed President's Plane

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WASHINGTON, Apr 8 (IPS) - As France and Rwanda exchange charges over responsibility for the Rwandan genocide that was launched 10 years ago this week, newly declassified U.S. documents make clear U.S. officials believed that Hutu hard-liners were responsible for the shoot-down of the Rwandan president's plane, which triggered the massacres.

The 13 documents released Wednesday, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act by the independent National Security Archive, include Pentagon, CIA, and State Department cables and reports that circulated within the U.S. government from Apr. 6, when Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana's plane was shot down as it prepared to land at Kigali airport. The genocide, which killed as many as 800,000 people in just three months, began just days later.

Although immediately after the shoot down, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) speculated that "former rebels of the Tutsi Rwandan Patriot Front" were on the list of assassination suspects, the cables show a growing conviction among knowledgeable U.S. officials over the next two days that hard-line Hutus, and probably the Presidential Guard (PG), were responsible.

"The PG hardliners were operationally in a position to take action", the 'Secretary's Morning Summary' for Apr. 8, 1994 asserted, although it also acknowledged a lack of physical evidence for the conclusion "because the PG has sealed off the site".

"No one in the Rwandan high command is blaming the Rwandan Patriot Front (RPF) for shooting down the plane", added the summary, a highly classified document prepared each day for the secretary of state and other top administration officials.

That U.S. officials and intelligence assets were persuaded within a day of the crash that Hutu hard-liners were responsible bolsters the argument of Rwandan President Paul Kagame, the RPF military chief at the time, who has long insisted that his forces, which were then negotiating a power-sharing accord with Habyarimana, had nothing to do with the former president's death.

Indeed, most observers have assumed that Hutu military hard-liners, upset with Habyarimana's compromises, were behind the attack. But last month, the French daily 'Le Monde' disclosed that a French judge who investigated the crash after a call for an inquiry by the family of one of the pilots, had concluded the RPF was not only responsible but that Kagame himself had ordered the shoot down.

The full report by the judge, Jean-Louis Bruguiere, remains secret, but the 'Le Monde' account was confirmed by a former RPF member, Abdul Ruzibiza, in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in which he claimed he had been charged with preparing the operation.

Kagame has strongly denied the charge, which appears to have inflamed already difficult relations between France and Rwanda. "I cannot comment on what Judge Bruguiere may have found or may have fabricated", he told Agence France Press after Le Monde published the story. "The story is invented".

Kagame and his government have repeatedly charged that France was complicit in the genocide, an accusation that the president repeated Wednesday at a government ceremony to mark the 10th anniversary. "(France) knowingly trained and armed the government soldiers and militias who were going to commit genocide and they knew they were going to commit genocide", he said.

He also accused Paris of having the "audacity" to attend the commemorative ceremony and for failing to apologise for its alleged role, prompting a walkout by French Deputy Foreign Minister Renaud Muslier. Paris has called Kagame's charges "completely groundless and even utterly scandalous".

In contrast to Paris, Washington, which has had generally excellent relations with Kagame and the RPF, was seen as a relatively neutral player in the run-up to the genocide. Although it consulted

closely with both France and the former colonial power, Belgium, throughout the 1994 crisis, it had its own independent sources of information and was not considered aligned with either the government or the RPF.

At the same time, Washington has never undertaken a major inquiry of its own performance before and during the genocide.

While former President Bill Clinton apologised for Washington's failure to take steps to stop the killing in a visit to Rwanda in 1998, other recently declassified documents obtained by the NSA showed that U.S. intelligence was well informed about both the scope and intensity of the killing as it unfolded, and even began using the word "genocide" to describe events as early as Apr. 23.

The declassified documents thus provide the strongest publicly available evidence about what U.S. intelligence was reporting and how U.S. officials reacted.

"U.S. intelligence is saying here that the hardliners shot the plane down", says William Ferroggiaro, the NSA researcher who obtained the documents. "These are the people who are most knowledgeable about what is happening based on the evidence that they acquired from sources on the ground, as well as deductions from the many reports they were receiving at the time", he said.

The documents show that, as of the night of the shoot down, senior U.S. officials were already advising then Secretary of State Warren Christopher of ominous signs of a pre-conceived plot by hardliners in the military.

"The Rwandan military prevented the U.N. from inspecting the (crash) site", wrote then Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Prudence Bushnell in a memo the same night, adding that it also "reportedly disarmed the U.N. (Belgian) peacekeepers stationed at the airport".

In the Secretary's Morning Summary the following day, INR identified as potential culprits, "hard-line Hutu soldiers, the former rebels of the Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), or someone else seeking to fan Hutu-Tutsi tensions", and warned that the shoot-down might also provoke large-scale violence in Burundi, whose president was also killed in the incident.

At the same time, the CIA, in its also highly classified National Intelligence Daily (NID), prepared for the president and other top officials, predicted the crash would cause "Hutus in Rwanda" to "seek revenge on Tutsis", and predicted, "the civil war may resume and could spill over to Burundi".

Later that morning, INR cited a report by Ambassador David Rawson, who had just met with Col Theoneste Bagosora, the genocide's mastermind, and the heads of the National Police, which said, "rogue Hutu elements of the military -- possibly the elite presidential guard" shot down the plane.

It also reported that "military elements" had killed the opposition Hutu prime minister and that fighting in the capital was being led by "ultra conservative Hutus (who) had been opposed to the peace settlement agreed to by the Hutu Rwandan government and the rebel Tutsi (RPF)".

Another INR cable based on reporting from the U.S. defence attaché posted to the U.S. Embassy in Cameroon later that afternoon "reports that the Presidential Guard is 'out of control' on the streets of Kigali, while all other military units remain in their barracks".

The attaché, Lt Col Charles Vuckovic, said there was "no effort by other military units to stop the presidential guard", suggesting that the regular army was not at that point involved or complicit in the genocide that was taking shape.

The Secretary's Morning Summary the following day reported, "Rwandan troops had kidnapped and killed" Belgian soldiers serving in the U.N. mission and murdered Rwandan government ministers. It added, "the army high command" itself had blamed the plane shoot down on "Hutu hardliners in the presidential guard", and concluded that they were in a position to carry out the action.

Later that day, a memorandum from the assistant secretary of defence for special operations described the Presidential Guard as "Hutu-extremists who probably shot down the president's plane".

Still later on the 8th, a State Department cable reported that, in addition to killing prominent Hutu and Tutsi civilians, Rwandan military forces had attacked an RPF battalion north of the demilitarised zone (DMZ) around Kigali.

In reply, it continued, the RPF had launched a counter-attack across the DMZ "because the ceasefire had been violated, its Kigali contingent had been attacked, the Rwandan army is killing officials and Tutsis, and the U.N. is unable to control the situation".

The source for the quote to a U.S. defence attaché was Kagame. (END/2004)