

## Rwanda in Crisis: Why are we Surprised?

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### Introduction

The present crisis in Rwanda was sparked on 6 April 1994 by the deaths of the presidents of Rwanda and neighbouring Burundi when the plane they were travelling in was shot down. The presidents had been returning to Kigali (Rwanda's capital) from peace talks in Arusha, Tanzania and it is likely that extremist segments of the Rwandan Presidential Guard and Army were responsible for shooting down the plane. The power monopoly of these hard-line elements in the mainly Hutu National Revolutionary Movement for Democracy (MRND) regime had been threatened by the power-sharing deal worked out between the mainly Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and Rwandan President (and General) Juvenal Habyarimana.

Mass killings began shortly after the fatal crash in Kigali, and were started by military-controlled government party militia who carried 'death-lists' of Tutsi and Hutu opposition blamed for shooting down the Presidents' plane.<sup>1</sup> Units of the RPF who were quartered in Kigali within a UN-monitored demilitarised zone began to engage government troops, and fighting quickly escalated. Although an interim government was formed on 12 April, it was unable to regain control, and no new ceasefire was established.

The RPF had captured half of Rwanda from government forces by the end of May, and by mid-July held Kigali, as well as the government's stronghold in Rugengeri. With government forces withdrawing into Zaire the RPF declared a ceasefire which effectively ended the civil war.<sup>2</sup> Several days later the RPF established a Government of National Unity for a transition period of five years. While a number of former opposition parties have been included in the new government, both the MRND and the anti-Tutsi extremist party, Coalition for the Defence of the Republic, have been excluded.

As with the political situation in Rwanda, the humanitarian situation is characterised by acute crisis. The massacres which have left at least

500,000 dead (some estimates are as high as one million), combined with the renewal of the civil

war, has generated an estimated two million refugees and an additional three million internally displaced persons (out of an original population of eight and a half million).<sup>3</sup> In one 24-hour period, 250,000 people moved across the border from Rwanda to Tanzania in "*the largest and fastest refugee exodus UNHCR has ever witnessed*".<sup>4</sup> This mass population movement has created a severe humanitarian crisis with aid workers battling incredible odds in the largest refugee camps in the world to stave off disease and starvation.

The severity of the refugee problem is continuing partly because of the unwillingness of refugees to return home under the rule of the government established by the RPF. Also contributing to the trickle of returnees is extremist propaganda broadcast from the exiled Hutu leadership in Zaire, that has, among other things, accused the UN of supporting the RPF.<sup>5</sup> The return of refugees and displaced persons presents a number of serious problems for a economically beleaguered Rwandan government. One potentially destabilising issue is land ownership in a country where arable land is a scarce resource. Another obstacle is the virtually non-existent health care system.<sup>6</sup> Rebuilding structures will take considerable time and money, but even more resources will be needed to rebuild Rwanda's shattered and war-weary society.

### Roots of the conflict

This most recent blood-letting in Rwanda has its roots in a system of domination established during several hundred years, beginning with Tutsi migrations into the area which is now Rwanda around the start of the 15th century. As a result of Tutsi migrations and subsequent pressures on land, a clientage system developed through which the Tutsi minority exercised overall control while the majority Hutu population was cast in the role of 'peasant-serf'.<sup>7</sup>

A class system based on protection from chiefdoms resulted in the formation of a warrior class through which political control was exercised. This system, and the antagonisms that grew up with it, was greatly strengthened and reinforced during German and later Belgian colonisation beginning in the late

1800s.<sup>8</sup> With German and Belgian support, the smaller 'chiefdoms' were brought together under Tutsi Mwami (or Kings) who used their privileged positions to gain control over more land and people. This hierarchical system was further reinforced through education of ruling Tutsi elites and an explicit ethnic division of power. As Dorward argues, "*colonial education fostered a psychology of 'superiority' amongst the Tutsi minority, while evoking smouldering Hutu resentment*".<sup>9</sup>

The 1950s brought about the beginning of the decolonisation process in Africa along with the development of anti-colonial nationalist movements. Belgium was one of the slowest to react to these independence movements. As with the short-sighted and disastrous decolonisation process in the Belgian Congo (now Zaire) Belgium attempted to retain the system it had put in place in Rwanda largely by exploiting ethnic differences in an attempt to render opposition ineffective. The already precarious situation in Rwanda was made worse by the death, in 1959, of the Rwandan king. A brief struggle to fill the resulting power vacuum triggered the ascendance of extremist Tutsis who attempted to carry out a policy of exclusion. Hutus revolted and took control of the area now known as Rwanda.

During this contested and bloody decolonisation period (1959-1962), the Hutu majority gained political control through elections. Although the Tutsi minority (overall, Tutsis made up about 15% of Rwanda's total population of three million) was meant to enjoy protection and safeguards under the new system, the new Hutu government set about removing Tutsis from positions of influence and power. Exiled in Uganda, the Tutsi leadership formed a guerrilla force which fought a series of minor skirmishes, eventually provoking a brutal response from the Hutu-controlled government.

A struggle for power in neighbouring Burundi in 1972 generated a flood of Hutu refugees who fled into Rwanda. Purportedly acting to protect Hutu from 'persecution', the then Defence Minister, General Habyarimana, staged a coup bringing the MRND to power with himself as President and established a government which held power for twenty years. While Tutsis suffered disproportionately under this regime, many Hutu who had been a part of the previous government or who opposed the new *status quo* were arrested and killed. Habyarimana's rule by terror and murder displaced huge numbers of both Hutu and Tutsi, generated large numbers of refugees, and provided

fertile breeding ground for the formation of a diverse opposition movement.

In 1990 the RPF invaded northern Rwanda, and although they were partly successful, they did not succeed in overthrowing the MRND. This was in part because Habyarimana asked for and received help from Belgian, French and CIA-backed Zairian troops.<sup>10</sup> The MRND used the invasion as an excuse to harass, arrest and kill both Hutu and Tutsi suspected of sympathising with the RPF. Negotiations facilitated by the Organisation of Africa Unity (OAU) and the Tanzanian government between the RPF and the MRND regime worked out a power-sharing deal leading to the signing in 1993 of the Arusha Peace Agreement.

Both sides agreed to the formation of a transition government followed by elections with the supervision and aid of the United Nations through the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR).<sup>11</sup> Opposition to the Arusha deal within the extreme right of Habyarimana's government was strong since, under the agreement, the power of the military would have been greatly reduced, and vested interests including large networks of corruption were directly threatened. Probably as a result of pressure from these vested interests, as well as the prospect that he would lose power, Habyarimana employed a number of delaying tactics in establishing a transitional government.

These delays not only hampered the deployment and implementation of UNAMIR's mandate, but increased tension and distrust among the RPF, other opposition leaders, and the government. Sporadic outbreaks of violence resulted, especially in Kigali. In late February two prominent opposition leaders were assassinated.<sup>12</sup> By April the situation was explosive, and the fatal plane crash was the spark which lit the most recent conflagration in Rwanda's troubled history.

### **Economic problems and the population explosion**

Through these decades of political and ethnic upheaval, Rwanda's population has more than doubled from three million in 1960 to an estimated eight and a half million in 1991. Economic growth was severely hampered both by this population explosion (which made it one of Africa's most densely populated countries) and by continued politically-motivated ethnic violence. These factors have contributed to Rwanda's classification by the UN as an LDC (Least Developed Country). Further complicating the problem is the fact that more than

70% of Rwanda's land is not arable. The part which can support agriculture is almost entirely in one narrow band of land running through the country around which Rwanda's population is concentrated.

The extreme need of countries like Rwanda, coupled with Western 'aid fatigue', does not bode well for the immediate or long term prospects of such underdeveloped areas. A recent report from the Economic Commission for Africa pointed out that Africa has a total debt burden of US\$302 billion, and, at the same time, is in need of an estimated US\$869 billion in aid to begin a process which would lead to economic recovery.

This was confirmed by a recent UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) report which noted that *"although economic decline of [the least developed African] countries taken together was arrested in 1993, economic recovery had not begun, and overall socio-economic conditions remained precarious"*.<sup>13</sup> Solutions will have to be found on a regional basis, since, as Rwanda and Burundi's linked histories illustrate, political and economic instability in one country is likely to spread to neighbouring countries.

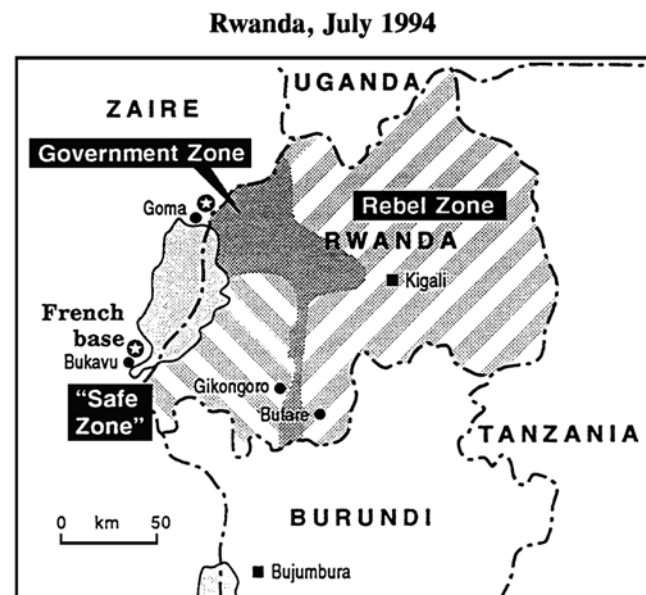
#### The international community's response to the crisis: UN peacekeeping

The UN has been engaged in a peacekeeping mission in Rwanda since 22 June 1993 when the Security Council decided to establish the United Nations Observer Mission Uganda-Rwanda (UNOMUR) on the Ugandan side of the border.<sup>14</sup> Prior to its commitment to this observer mission, put in place to provide some stability and security at the border between Uganda and Rwanda, the UN's involvement in the political problems of Rwanda was minimal. Following the conclusion of peace talks between the Rwandan government and the RPF which led to the signing of the Arusha Peace Agreement on 4 August 1993, the Security Council decided, at the request of the parties to the Arusha agreement, to establish the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR).<sup>15</sup>

UNAMIR's mandate was to monitor the implementation of the Arusha agreement including the establishment of a transitional government and eventually (no later than December 1995) to monitor *"free and fair"* elections. The mandate contained a number of other tasks crucial to confidence-building throughout the transition process.

According to Security Council Resolution (SCR) 876, UN peacekeepers were responsible for establishing cantonment areas for various military groups and the demarcation and patrol of a demilitarised zone. Part of this work involved escorting and then monitoring a battalion-strength group (approximately 600) RPF fighters to a cantonment area within the city of Kigali itself. In addition, UNAMIR was tasked with helping the parties integrate their armed forces into a new national army and assist in re-training the new force. Because of the power and corruption of the twenty-year old military regime, this was considered a crucial aspect of the Arusha agreement and central for the prospects of long term peace in Rwanda.

UNAMIR was also given responsibility for



monitoring the repatriation of refugees and assisting humanitarian assistance in cooperation with relief agencies operating in Rwanda. Finally, the mandate provided for a small civilian police contingent which was to monitor the activities of the Rwandan gendarmerie and police. Although the mission faced a number of delays in deployment, by April 1994, UNAMIR had reached 2,500, approximately half its authorised strength, and was based, for the most part, in and around Kigali.

Following the outbreak of violence after 6 April and the subsequent deaths of 10 Belgian UN peacekeepers, Belgium decided to withdraw its contingent (which made up approximately one half of the peacekeeping force on the ground).<sup>16</sup> In response to the collapse of the Rwandan government and with the future of UNAMIR in doubt because of the Belgian withdrawal, a

Secretariat report, which outlined several alternatives for re-structuring the troubled mission, was tabled in the Security Council. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali favoured expansion of the mission and lobbied intensively to achieve a positive vote. The United States, however, still feeling the fallout of failures in Somalia, refused to vote for expansion. Instead, the US got agreement to reduce the mission to approximately 270 and change its mandate (in fact, numbers never dropped below 440).<sup>17</sup> UNAMIR's new mandate essentially reduced the peacekeeping mission to an observer mission, allowing it to act as an intermediary between the parties and seek a ceasefire, to assist with humanitarian relief "to the extent possible" and to monitor and report on further developments.

This was a less than adequate response to the situation. However, under intense public pressure, which was undoubtedly contributed to by the media coverage of the crisis,<sup>18</sup> the Security Council was forced to reconsider the possibility of expanding the mission. After lengthy debate the Council passed SCR 925 creating UNAMIR II.<sup>19</sup>

The new mission was humanitarian (i.e. did not have a political function such as monitoring elections) and authorised an upper limit of 5,500, largely military, peacekeepers.<sup>20</sup> The mission was to be put into the field in three phases taking one month for full deployment.<sup>21</sup> It was responsible for "contributing to the security and protection of displaced persons" by creating "secure humanitarian areas" and providing security and support for the distribution of humanitarian aid.

However, beyond the immediate emplacement of 500 Ghanian peacekeepers and 150 military observers, deployment of additional elements of the new mission was put on hold. By the end of May a Secretariat report estimated that it would be at least four more weeks before Phase I was complete. Particularly problematic was procuring appropriate equipment for the Ghanian troops, especially armoured personnel carriers (APCs). This further delay was caused, in part, by the United States which, while voting with strong reservations for UNAMIR II, insisted on delaying deployment of the bulk of the force pending Security Council approval of a new Secretariat report on the crisis.

At the same time, member states, especially the US and Western European nations, were very reluctant to provide equipment and logistical support for the operation.<sup>22</sup> Among the five permanent members of the Security Council, France was the most vocally critical about the unwillingness of the international

community (particularly the US) to act. In the absence of any agreement in the Security Council on action in Rwanda, France suggested that it deploy French troops to do the job originally mandated in SCR 925 to create protected security zones for vulnerable civilian populations.<sup>23</sup>

Initially, this proposal for direct intervention received non-committal responses from Western countries. The RPF was vehemently opposed to the move citing previous French interventions in Rwanda in support of the Habyarimana regime as well as the (probably well-founded) suspicion that France was more interested in protecting its own vested interests in Rwanda than it was in fulfilling a humanitarian mandate.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, strongest endorsement of the French proposal came from some humanitarian aid organisations who argued that military intervention was the only way to stop the genocide. *Medecins Sans Frontieres*, for example, for the first time in its history, supported military intervention.<sup>25</sup>

Caught between intense media attention and public pressure and the Secretary-General's announcement that full deployment for UNAMIR II was at least three months away, given continued problems with attaining commitments from countries to contribute troops and materials to UNAMIR, the Security Council was forced to take action. On 22 June, the Council voted to allow the proposed French intervention. The measure passed by the lowest margin ever for a UN authorised mission, with 10 in favour, none against and five abstentions.<sup>26</sup>

The French action, dubbed *Operation Turquoise*, was authorised under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, thereby allowing French troops to use force ("all means necessary"). The mission was mandated for two months and under French, rather than UN, control. The mandate was essentially the same as the one authorising UNAMIR II (except for the use of force provision), and the point of the operation, according to the UN and France was to provide a protective presence until UNAMIR could become fully operational. The French eventually created a 'safe-zone' in south-western Rwanda.<sup>27</sup> The RPF responded to this UN-French move saying they would fight the French as well as former-government forces while reiterating deep suspicions about French motives. They later pulled back from that confrontational stance stating that they would reserve judgement on the operation and would not fight the French as long as French troops adhered to their humanitarian mandate.<sup>28</sup>

French troops completed their withdrawal from the 'safe-zone' by the third week of August amid claims by Ethiopian peacekeeping troops that the French "*protected known murderers, and released prisoners suspected of crimes against humanity*".<sup>29</sup> Despite the controversy surrounding the deployment and activities of *Operation Turquoise*, France came under considerable pressure to extend their stay.<sup>30</sup> Many, including the head of the UN's Department of Humanitarian Affairs, believed that a withdrawal would create enough uncertainty and instability to potentially drive one to two million Rwandans across Zaire's border.<sup>31</sup> After considerable effort to get the operation off the ground, why were the French so eager to leave? Had France grown tired of carrying the burden of the international community's inaction (military and political leaders do not seem to be able to consider, plan for, or act beyond a few months into the future), or perhaps French leaders had judged, with good reason, that waiting for other UN members to pledge enough troops and equipment to replace them might keep their troops in Rwanda indefinitely?

The more likely explanation of the French refusal to maintain its presence was their lack of success in restoring order to the so-called safe-zone they created and the realisation that genuine stability would not be re-established without either far more force than they were willing to commit over an extended period, or lengthy diplomatic efforts.<sup>32</sup> In any case, two months was deemed long enough and France did not seek an extension of its mandate. What they left behind should lead us to question the ethics of 'showboat' interventionism (a point which could equally be applied in other circumstances to the activities of other leading Western nations), as much as we question inaction.

In late July, the United States began *Operation Support Hope* based at Kigali airport. The US-run mission, not part of the UN operation, was set up to re-open the airport and to operate round-the-clock aid and military flights with the aim of doubling the relief currently getting to the area. A further 900 US troops have been performing similar transport functions in refugee camps in surrounding countries. By the time the bulk of French troops had withdrawn, UNAMIR had offers of troops bringing its total up to 4,000 peace-keepers, although by 20 August only 30% of the 5,500 authorised had actually arrived in Rwanda.<sup>33</sup> While Western countries take on the short term task of providing relief transport, they appear to be leaving the far more difficult and dangerous re-building work to the largely African UN peacekeeping force.

## Conclusion

Given Rwanda's rather bleak history, the present crisis is not surprising. Nor is it surprising that the leading members of the community of nations have done little, beyond *ad hoc* piecemeal ventures, to alleviate Rwanda's suffering either before April 1994 or since. As Howard Clark aptly put it:

*"interventions - military or otherwise - won't offer speedy solutions to deep-seated conflicts.. For the governments, sending troops.. comes cheaper than making a genuine commitment to the well-being of the region, cheaper than heeding the warning signs, cheaper than preventive programmes, far cheaper than ending the arms trade".*<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately, both troops operating on the initiative of individual nations, and a group of 5,500 peacekeepers (if they are ever all actually deployed), put into place long after the fact, will have limited power to help Rwanda limp toward some long term peace. It is missing the point to blame the United Nations (or its peacekeepers) for this depressing reality, as if it were possible to separate the UN from the will to act of its most powerful members. Without creative and purposeful leadership from the United States and other leading nations on the Security Council, as well as strong financial backing which recognises the need for the long term commitment of resources, the prospects for Rwanda and other suffering nations are little better than dismal. This latest reactive and slow response to crisis is an appalling, and likely to be repeated, example of far too little much too late.

## NOTES:

- 1 Dorward, D. (1994) 'Rwanda: The Politics of Ethnic Cleansing and Violations of Human Rights', *Human Rights Defender*, 3, 3: 4-5. Dorward says that President Habyarimana's regime, the National Revolutionary Movement for Democracy (MRND), recruited and controlled party militia called the *inyarhamwe* and that this militia as well as the youth wing of an extremist Hutu faction, the Coalition for the Defence of the Republic, called the *impuzamugambi*, were responsible for much of the killing which ensued (p. 4). See also, Dorward, D. (1994) 'Rwanda and Burundi: The Politics of Ethnicity and the Psychology of Victimisation', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, 71, 1: 31-8.
- 2 UN Doc. S/1994/924, 3/8/94, para. 3; Dinmore, G. (1994) 'Rwandan Refugee Crisis Builds to Catastrophe', *Reuter News Service*, 17 July.
- 3 UN Doc. S/1994/924, 3/8/94, para. 8.
- 4 UN Doc. REF/1079, 5/5/94.

- 5 Hartley, A. (1994) 'Rwanda: UN Battles for Rwanda Refugees' Hearts and Minds', *Reuter News Service*, 2/8/94; 'Peacekeeping by Radio', *The Economist*, 3/9/94.
- 6 'Consolidated Rwanda Report', *USAid Rwanda Information Centre*, Update No. 9, 22-30/8/94.
- 7 Zolberg, A. et al. (1989) *Escape From Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 45-50.
- 8 Zolberg, *Escape From Violence*, 45-50.
- 9 Dorward, 'Rwanda and Burundi', 1994, 32.
- 10 Dorward, 'Rwanda and Burundi', 1994, 35; on French involvement see also, Raymond Bonner, 'France Backs Away from Battle in Rwanda', *The New York Times*, 6/7/94.
- 11 UN Doc. SCR 872, 5/10/93.
- 12 UN Doc. S/1994/360, 30/3/94, especially paras. 4-22 and 27.
- 13 UN Doc. TAD/1734, 20/4/94.
- 14 UN Doc. SCR 846, 22/6/93.
- 15 UN Doc. SCR 872, 5/10/93.
- 16 Editorial Report, 'Heavy Fighting in Kigali; Killing of Belgian Troops, Catholic Priests Reported', BBC Monitoring Service: Africa, 9/4/94.
- 17 UN Doc. S/1994/565, 13/5/94 and UN Doc. SCR 912, 21/4/94.
- 18 J. Bone, 'US veto holds back Rwanda peace force', *The Times*, 18/5/94; L. Elliot, 'Fury greets US block on peace force', *The Guardian*, 18/5/94; P. McCarthy, 'US bridles at UN plan for Rwanda', *Melbourne Age*, 13/5/94; P. McCarthy, 'United Nations: UN push for new Rwanda peace mission', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5/5/94; P. Pullella, 'Stop Africa from burning and bleeding, Bishops say', *Reuter News Service*, 6/5/94; S. Peterson, 'International - battle for Kigali at centre of renewed fighting', *Daily Telegraph*, 6/5/94.
- 19 UN Doc. SCR 925, 8/6/94.
- 20 UN Doc. S/1994/565, 13/5/94, paras. 16-17.
- 21 UN Doc. S/1994/565, 13/5/94, paras. 18-21.
- 22 UN Doc. S/1994/640, 31/5/94; 'Editorial - Rwandan Excuses', *The Economist*, 16/6/94.
- 23 Palmer, J. 'Italy and France Ready to Send Troops to Rwanda', *The Guardian*, 18/6/94.
- 24 Gahima, G., RPF Special Envoy to the UN and USA, Letter to UN Secretary-General and Security Council, RPF Press Release, 4/7/94.
- 25 Palmer, J. 'Italy and France Ready to Send Troops to Rwanda', *The Guardian*, 18/6/94.
- 26 UN Doc. SCR 929, 22/6/94; 'UN Council Approves French Force for Rwanda', *Reuter News Service*, 22/6/94; Goodman, A. 'Security Council Authorises French Force for Rwanda', *Reuter News Service*, 22/6/94.
- 27 The safe-zone covered the Cyangugu-Kibuye-Gikongoro triangle covering approximately one-fifth of Rwandan territory, UN Doc. S/1994/924, 3/8/94, para.7.
- 28 'RPF Waiting to Pass Judgement on French Operation', BBC Monitoring Service: Africa, 25/6/94 .
- 29 McGreal, C. 'French Accused of Protecting Killers', *The Guardian*, 27/8/94.
- 30 Leopold, E. 'UN Decries Difficulty in Raising Force for Rwanda', *Reuter News Service*, 28/7/94.
- 31 Beresford, D. 'UN Attacks Aid Disarray', *The Guardian*, 28/7/94.
- 32 McGreal, C. 'French pull back, leaving terror zone behind', *The Guardian*, 30/7/94.
- 33 Aldinger, C. 'US Defence Chief Says Rwanda Crisis Turns Corner', *Reuter News Service*, 31/7/94; 'Editorial - A Lesson from Rwanda', *The Economist*, 20/8/94.
- 34 Clark, H. (1994) 'Rwanda: Can French Arms Curb French Arms?', *Peace News*, no. 2380 (July).

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