Chapter Twelve

Case Studies: Failure to Prevent Genocide in Rwanda (1994), Srebrenica (1995) and Darfur (since 2003)

1. Introduction

In just 100 days in the Spring of 1994, an estimated 800,000 persons were killed in the genocide in Rwanda (Des Forges 1999; UN Doc. S/1999/1257; Organization of African Unity 2000). Clear early warnings were issued before the killings started and were communicated to the responsible decision-makers within the UN. The information came from the most authoritative and reliable sources available: the UN peace-keeper commanders in the field. These signals on the deteriorating situation in Rwanda were sent to UN Headquarters in New York and were deemed completely reliable and trustworthy by the UN Secretariat. The commanders were sending their early warnings in combination with a request for instructions and proposals for how to act in such circumstances. For instance, the clear warning about upcoming violence and the request, from the commander of the peacekeepers in Rwanda, Romeo Dallaire to track arms caches, was made on January 11, 1994, three months before the genocide started. This alarming information, later referred to as the so-called “genocide fax”, like the other early warnings, was trusted and was not disputed by the UN Secretariat, but the peace-keepers were refused authorisation for action because the seizure of weapons was seen as going beyond their mandate. Concerning this situation, we will describe the near total absence of decision-making that took place in the Security Council to prevent and later to stop the genocide.

Tragically, the failures of Rwanda have been repeated. The right of UNAMID peace-keepers in Darfur to track arms caches and ensure their disposal contained in a Security Council Resolution 1706 (August 31, 2006) was eventually deleted from the later Resolution 1769 (July 31, 2007). The main question addressed in this chapter will be: what are the lessons to be drawn from the genocides in Rwanda, Srebrenica and Darfur? The chapter is a slightly revised reprint of the article Failures to Prevent Genocide in Rwanda (1994), Srebrenica (1995) and Darfur (since 2003) by Fred Grünfeld and Wessel Vermeulen published in Genocide Studies and Prevention, volume 4, no. 2 pp.
221–237, 2009 by the University of Toronto Press. Reprinted with permission from University of Toronto Press Incorporated (www.utpjournals.com). The authors are very grateful to the publisher for agreeing to part of that article being published in this larger work of the author. Section 2 of this chapter on Rwanda is also based on the study published in The Failure to Prevent Genocide in Rwanda: The Role of Bystanders, published in 2007 (Grünfeld & Huijboom 2007). The third section (3) on Srebrenica is based on the study published in 2008, The Role of Bystanders in Rwanda and Srebrenica: Lessons Learned (Grünfeld 2008, 457–486). Section 4 on Darfur is based on ongoing research into early warning and early action in the period 2003–2010.

The compelling questions are: Why did the international bystanders fail to act to prevent or to stop the genocides in Rwanda, Srebrenica and Darfur? What are the similarities and what are the differences between these cases? In what way would the international bystander have been able to act with the available instruments? Why were the warnings not translated into action or, more precisely, what are the reasons for not taking any action at all and why was the action undertaken ineffective? Who was involved in the international decision-making and why was that process continually hampered? Before answering these questions, we will briefly describe for each of these three cases: 1. the availability of information which could have been seen as the early warning signs in order to take action; 2. the availability of military and non-military instruments to prevent or stop these atrocities (called here, ‘genocide’); and 3. the decision-making process which took place by national governments and within the UN.

2. Rwanda

A long time before the plane carrying President Juvénil Habyarimana of Rwanda was shot down on April 6, 1994, killings taking place in Rwanda could have been described as a ‘possible genocide’ (UN Doc. E/CN.4/1994/7/Add.1).\footnote{Besides President Habyarimana, President Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi, Déogratias Nsabimana, the Chief of Staff of the Rwandan army, and three crew members of French nationality were on board and killed as well. See in particular Filip Reyntjens on the possible perpetrators of this trigger event in L’Afrique des Grands Lacs, en crise : Rwanda, Burundi, 1988–1994. See also Linda Melvern for the planning and the events just after the crash in Conspiracy to Murder, The Rwandan Genocide, London: Verso, 2004.} In the first week of the atrocities, which started immediately after the plane crash, political adversaries, i.e. moderate political leaders were killed. This period can therefore be described as a politicide rather than as genocide (see chapter 11 on the stages of genocide and the role of killing ‘moderates’ therein). In the second week, however, the killing of all persons from the Tutsi ethnic group became the main priority, with more than 100,000