CHAPTER 14

EVACUATION

14.1 U.S. REACTION TO THE CRASH

Prudence Bushnell, the U.S. Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, was sitting at her desk when Kevin Aiston, the desk officer for Rwanda, came in and told her that the airplane with the Presidents of Rwanda and Burundi had crashed. She responded in disbelief and denial. Her first reaction to Aiston was: “No, it can’t be. It just can’t be. Go and get in touch with David Rawson [U.S. ambassador in Kigali] and check your facts. Please, this certainly can’t be.” Bushnell, who had visited Rwanda in March, knew immediately that it was very bad news. The only thing that she did not know was whether it was worse for Rwanda or Burundi.

Bushnell sent a memorandum, through the Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Peter Tarroff, to the Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, titled: “Death of Rwandan and Burundian Presidents in Plane Crash outside Kigali.” She informed Tarroff and Christopher of the information available: “The military intended to take power temporarily” and “there is an increase in sporadic gunfire and grenade explosions” in Kigali. Furthermore, she warned that “wide-spread violence could break out in either of both countries, particularly if it is confirmed that the plane was shot down.” During the day, Rawson informed Washington that it looked like the plane had indeed been shot down. That same day, President William (Bill) Clinton issued a statement: “[I am] shocked and deeply saddened . . . horrified that elements of the Rwandan security forces

3 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of African Affairs, Memorandum from Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Prudence Bushnell to the Secretary through Under Secretary for Political Affairs Peter Tarroff, “Death of Rwandan and Burundian Presidents in Plane Crash Outside Kigali,” April 6, 1994, available at http://www.gwu.edu/~ntr/nasarefb/8614a0044.pdf.
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have sought out and murdered Rwandan officials . . . extend my condolences . . . condemn these actions and I call on all parties to cease any such actions immediately." In the Frontline interview, Rawson stated that at that moment, his opinion was that the United Nations needed a stronger mandate and equipment to carry out that mandate if, "indeed, they were going to be able to hold—what I didn’t realize was how very difficult that process was." He indicated, however, that he was not aware of the very serious consequences the plane crash was to have. He admitted that he underestimated the situation.8

In the morning of April 7, U.S. time, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) produced the highly sensitive National Intelligence Daily (NID), which was titled: "Rwanda-Burundi: Presidential Deaths Likely to Renew Fighting." The NID, which was sent to top policymakers at the White House, the State Department, the Defense Department and other agencies, predicted that the shooting down of the plane would cause "Hutus in Rwanda to seek revenge on Tutsis" and predicted that "the civil war may resume and could spill over to Burundi."9 That same morning the "Secretary Morning Summary," a State Department report of important intelligence items, was delivered to the Secretary of State and senior department officials.10 The Summary stated that the plane was reportedly shot down and that it was still unknown who the perpetrators were—whether it was "hard-line Hutu soldiers, former rebels of the RPF, or others seeking to fan Hutu-Tutsi tensions." Furthermore, the report indicated that the crash could "also spark an upsurge of violence in Burundi."11

At 8:45 U.S. time, the first SPOT report was received. SPOT reports are intelligence reports written "on-the-spot," aimed at "flagging" severe problems for senior Department of State officials. The SPOT report stated that, according to the information of Ambassador Rawson, "rogue Hutu elements of the military, possibly the elite presidential guard, had shot the plane." The report continued by saying that: "Military elements had killed the Prime Minister and several other Rwandan cabinet officials, including senior ranking Tutsi."12

9 Interview with D. Rawson, October 5, 2003.
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11 The "Secretary Morning Summary," a summary report of important intelligence items from the Bureau of Intelligence and Research of the State Department, available at http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB119/index.htm. U.S. State Department, "Burundi-Rwanda: Presidents Killed," Excerpt from State Department, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Secretary's Morning Summary, April 7, 1994, available at http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB119/Rw2.pdf.

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