CHAPTER 17

THE ROLE OF THE NETHERLANDS THROUGHOUT THE GENOCIDE

The role of a non-direct involved bystander state during the genocide will now be illustrated with the role of the Netherlands. The Netherlands had no specific ties with Rwanda from colonial history or in another way. The Netherlands was not represented in the Security Council during this period. There was very limited news coverage in the Netherlands on the situation in Rwanda. Political debates in the country and in parliament concerning the topic were scarce. In short, from the outside, the overall impression is that the Netherlands was in no way involved in the developments in Rwanda in the period 1993–1994. Since the 1970s Rwanda was however one of the countries that received development aid from the Netherlands, and the Netherlands even co-financed the negotiations in Arusha for a peace accord. The Netherlands did not have an embassy in Rwanda, and the development aid was made by a Netherlands-based international development organization that hardly gave any political information to the Netherlands Minister for Development Cooperation, Jan Pronk. The plane crash and its consequences was a completely unexpected surprise for him. He had not been warned by his Belgian colleague, for instance, and in hindsight he considers his ignorance of the deteriorating situation in Rwanda as a failure.1

Some research into the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs nevertheless showed that in the diplomatic field, the Netherlands was often asked to fulfill a role in the peace-keeping mission, and, as a result, it participated in the debates among the countries that might contribute soldiers to UNAMIR I and II. The Netherlands could have played a role, and it was informed in several ways on the developments and atrocities in Rwanda. The requests from the United Nations to the Netherlands were discussed at the highest decision-making echelon: the Cabinet. However, the government rejected all requests and was unwilling to send military material at all. The Netherlands was seen as a country with a rather high profile on human rights, and at that time, the government was composed of Ministers in Foreign Affairs, Defense and Development Cooperation with a strong and outspoken position in the promotion of human rights.

Interview with J. Pronk, August 21, 2006.  
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The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Peter Koeckmans, was for instance the for­mer U.N. Rapporteur on Torture. As an expert professor in international pub­lic law, he also headed the delegation of the Netherlands at the Human Rights Commission in Geneva. The other two ministers belonged to the Labour Party, which had a more outspoken international orientation and was moreover a sup­porter of a strong U.N. role in the world. Jan Pronk, for instance was Deputy Secretary-General United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, Assistant Secretary-General United Nations) in Geneva from 1980 to 1986, and had earlier been Minister for Development Cooperation in the Netherlands, in the period 1973–1977, a position that he continued in the period 1989–1998. Since 2004 he has been the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in Khartoum in the Sudan. One may have expected that that government would be more willing to accept the U.N. invitation to play a role than it was in reality. Moreover, the failure of the Dutch peace-keepers in Srebrenica did not play a role at that moment, because the fall of Srebrenica took place one year later in July 1995. As we will show in this chapter, even a bystander state like the Netherlands was aware of what was happening but nonetheless made the decision at the highest level not to help the United Nations with military means to prevent or stop the mass murder in Rwanda.

On the other hand, we will pay particular attention to the role of the Minister of Development Cooperation, Jan Pronk, who was very involved and often made visits to the area. He made contact with Paul Kagame and other leaders during the genocide in Rwanda and did his best to mediate between countries sur­rounding Rwanda to promote a cessation to the warfare. He also did his best to obtain financial backing from the European Union for an African peace-keeping mission in the area. Our interview with Pronk reaffirmed that his endeavors were more personal initiatives, rather than being based on a firm Dutch policy position. He was not hindered in these activities by Parliament or by the other members of the Cabinet, and they all agreed to the continued increase of development aid to this region, particularly for the refugees and dis­placed persons. On the other hand the other ministers in the Dutch government were unwilling to contribute with military means, a decision by which he had to abide.

17.1 THE DUTCH ROLE IN UNOMUR AND UNAMIR

The Netherlands was already asked to contribute at an early stage in the preparation of UNAMIR by UNOMUR. Parliament was informed in June 1993 of the U.N. request for assistance to UNAMIR from the Netherlands in a for­mepage letter from the Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs. Dutch partici­pation was asked in this letter.

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