NEVER AGAIN?

RWANDA AND THE WORLD

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The Role of the United Nations

After having been presented by Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the 2004 Stockholm International Forum, a new mechanism within the United Nations has now been created to more efficiently bring issues on genocide and other massive violations of human rights forward to the Security Council. This reform was no doubt to a great extent a result of the 1994 experience in Rwanda.

To say that the UN has an important role to play in humanitarian affairs is to say that there is a need for the Organization and its Members States to function effectively and efficiently and, when faced with acute crisis situations, to act with one voice, without individual states being able to derail the process.

This article aims, by way of summarily reviewing the 1994 Rwanda crisis and the international community’s handling of it, to illustrate the resulting but absolutely unnecessary powerlessness of the UN.

In 1994, despite the availability of information, a combination of internal malfunctioning and national interventionism and protectionism paralysed the UN and made it of little utility in the face of a genocide.

The UN was not well-prepared enough for this kind of situation with a very clear need to adequately intervene. When it eventually started its peacekeeping intervention, this was based on incorrect presumptions. The mandates from New York became far too limited. The chains of command/responsibility were disorganized. In practice, both at UN Headquarters and in the field, the mandates were implemented in an anxious and unsteady way, and the decided military intervention became problematic. Headquarters only too late corrected their initial points of departure. In brief, a lack of political will resulted in helplessness.

Rwanda is a pivotal example of what can happen when the international community is paralysed.

I share the opinion that, over ten years after these events, it is high time for us to draw the relevant conclusions for the future. Prevention of genocide must be given a more prominent place on the agenda. The lessons learnt, I am convinced, prove the importance of giving the UN a crucial role in international crisis and conflict management.

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One of the Worst Atrocities in History

Over the course of 100 days, genocide, ‘the crime of crimes’, occurred in Rwanda in 1994. It is estimated that at least 800,000 and maybe up to one million people were murdered.

How is it possible that, in this day and age, such shocking massacres were allowed to happen? Why is it that the international community and the United Nations, despite apparently clear warnings, failed to stop the madness? What lessons are to be learned from this experience?

There is a rapidly growing literature on the events leading to the massacres and on the genocide itself. My own home-made bibliography today covers some twenty-five pages of titles.1

Several reports have also been prepared, some of which contain a number of useful suggestions as to how to improve effectiveness and efficiency in the UN’s general crisis preparedness and crisis handling.

Before treating one of these reports, namely the so-called Carlsson Report,2 it might be useful to try and briefly recall the key events of 1994 as they appear in relevant books, articles and reports.3

Rwanda

Landlocked Rwanda, often called ‘The country of the thousand hills’, is situated in the Great Lakes Region, in the very heart of Africa, neighbouring Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and the Congo-Kinshasa.

It is a small and dizzyingly beautiful country with fertile land, lush vegetation, abounding water (including the sources of the Nile), farms, villages, towns,

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3 For data in the following text, a general reference is made here, firstly, to the sources mentioned in supra note 1, secondly, to the Carlsson Report supra note 2, and, thirdly, to the documentation of the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), Arusha, Tanzania (<www.ictr.org>), including comprehensive testimonies by Professors Alison Des Forges (USA), André Guichaoua (France) and Filip Reyntjens (Belgium). Most valuable contributions to the text, in both form and substance, have been made by Jamie A. Williamson (UK).