Why we must never forget the Rwandan Genocide
Published on Pambazuka News (https://www.pambazuka.org)

Gerald Caplan [1]
Thursday, April 1, 2004 - 03:00

Those of us who are preoccupied, even obsessed, with commemorating in 2004 the 10th anniversary of the Rwanda genocide are often taken aback when we’re asked what all the fuss is about. After all, just today I received from the Holocaust Centre of Toronto an invitation to join in commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Holocaust in Hungary. Not the entire Holocaust, just the terrible Hungarian chapter. Yet memorializing the genocide in Rwanda is never taken for granted in the same way.

Isn’t it already ancient history? Aren’t there all kinds of human catastrophes that no one much bothers with? Didn’t it take place in faraway Africa, in an obscure country few people could find on a map. Wasn’t it just another case of Africans killing Africans? What does it have to do with us, anyway?

These questions deserve answers, not least because some are entirely legitimate. Above all, it is fundamentally true that there would have been no genocide had some Rwandans not decided for their own selfish reasons to exterminate many other Rwandans. But once this truth is acknowledged, a powerful case for remembering Rwanda remains, and needs to be made.

The responsibility to remember:

First, Rwanda was not just another ugly event in human history. Virtually all students of the subject agree that what happened over 100 days from April to July 1994 constituted one of the purest manifestations of genocide in our time, meeting all the criteria set down in the 1948 Geneva Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide. Genocide experts debate whether Cambodia or Srebrenica or Burundi were “authentic” genocides; like the Holocaust and (except for the Turkish government and its apologists) the Armenian genocide of 1915, no one disagrees about Rwanda. And since genocide is universally seen as the crime of crimes, an attack not just on the actual victims but on all humanity, by definition it needs to be remembered and memorialized.

Second, it wasn’t just another case of Africans killing Africans, or, as some clueless reporters enjoyed writing, of Hutu killing Tutsi and Tutsi killing Hutu (or Hutsi and Tutu, for all they knew or cared). The Rwandan genocide was a deliberate conspiratorial operation planned, organized and executed by a small, sophisticated, highly organized group of greedy Hutu extremists who believed their self-interest would be enhanced if every one of Rwanda’s 1 million Tutsi were annihilated. They came frighteningly close to total success.

Third, the west has played a central role in Rwanda over the past century. Just as no person is an island and there’s no such thing as a self-made man, so every nation is the synthesis of internal and external influences. This is particularly true of nations that have been colonies, where imperial forces have played a defining role. To its everlasting misfortune, Rwanda is the quintessential example of this reality. The central dynamic of Rwandan history for the past 80 years, the characteristic that allowed the genocide to be carried out, was the bitter division between Hutu and Tutsi. Yet this division was largely an artifact created by the Roman Catholic Church and the Belgian colonizers.

Instead of trying to unite all the people they found in Rwanda 100 years ago, Catholic missionaries invented an entire phony pedigree that irreconcilably divided Rwandans into superior Tutsi and inferior Hutu. When the Belgians were given control of the country following World War 1, this contrived hierarchy served their interests well, and they proceeded to institutionalize what amounted to a racist ideology. At independence in the early 1960s, this pyramid was turned on its head, and for the next 40 years Rwanda was run as a racist Hutu dictatorship. None of this would have happened without the Church and the Belgians.

The Culprits:

Last, but hardly least, the 1994 genocide could have been prevented in whole or in part by some of the same external forces that shaped the country’s tragic destiny. But without exception, every outside agency with the capacity to intervene failed to do so. My own list of culprits, in order of
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Responsibility, is as follows:

-the government of France
-the Roman Catholic Church
-the government of the United States
-the government of Belgium
-the government of Britain
-the UN Secretariat.

I name the French and the Church first since they both had the influence to deter the genocide plotters from launching the genocide in the first place. Rwanda was the most Christianized country in Africa and the Roman Catholics were far and away the largest Christian denomination. Catholicism was virtually the official state religion. Catholic officials had enormous influence at both the elite and the grassroots level, which they consistently failed to use to protest against the government’s overtly racist policies and practices. Indeed, the Church gave the government moral authority. Once the genocide began, Catholic leaders in the main refused to condemn the government, never used the word genocide, and many individual priests and nuns actually aided the genocidaires.

Rwanda was a French-speaking country, and France replaced Belgium as the key foreign presence. When the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a rebel group of English-speaking Tutsi refugees from Uganda, invaded Rwanda in 1990, the French military flew in to save the day for the Hutu government. For the following several years, right to the very moment the genocide began, French officials had enormous influence with both the Rwandan government and army. They failed completely to use that leverage to insist that the government curtail its racist policies and propaganda, stop the increasing massacres, end the widespread human rights abuses, and disband the death squads and death lists.

Two months after the genocide began, a French intervention force created a safe haven in the southwest of the country through which they allowed genocidaires leaders and killers, fleeing from the advancing RPF, to escape across the border into Zaire. From Zaire they began an insurgency back into Rwanda with the purpose of “finishing the job”. Eventually this led to the Rwandans invading Zaire/Congo to suppress the insurgency, which in turn soon led to the vicious wars in the Congo and the subsequent appalling cost in human lives throughout eastern Congo.

Once the genocide was launched after April 6, 1994, the American government, steadfastly backed by the British government, were primarily responsible for the failure of the UN Security Council to reinforce its puny mission to Rwanda. Under no circumstances were these governments prepared to budge. The Commander of the UN force - UNAMIR - repeatedly pleaded for reinforcements, and was repeatedly turned down.

Two weeks into the genocide, the Security Council voted to reduce UNAMIR from 2500 to 270 men - an act almost impossible to believe 10 years later. Six weeks into the genocide, as credible reports of hundreds of thousands of deaths became commonplace and the reality of a full-blown genocide became undeniable, the Security Council voted finally to send some 4500 troops to Rwanda. Several contingents of African troops were put on standby, but deliberate stalling tactics by the USA and Britain meant that by the end of the genocide, when the Tutsi-led rebels were sworn in as the new government on July 19, not a single reinforcement of soldiers or material ever reached Rwanda. This was one of the darkest moments in the history of the United Nations.

As for Belgium, notwithstanding the racist attitudes and colonial behaviour of its soldiers, their contingent was the backbone of UNAMIR. When 10 Belgian soldiers were murdered by Rwandan government troops on the very first morning of the genocide, the Brussels government immediately decided to withdraw the remainder of its forces and to lobby the Security Council to suspend the entire Rwandan mission. Its motive was simple: They did not want to be seen as the sole party undermining UNAMIR. At the Security Council, of course, it found eager allies.

The role of the UN Secretariat is somewhat ambiguous. To a large extent, its failure to support the pleas of its own UNAMIR Force Commander reflected its lack of capacity to cope with yet another crisis combined with its understanding that the US and Britain would not alter their intransigent
positions. Still, there were many occasions when the Secretariat failed to convey to the full Security Council the dire situation in Rwanda, and many opportunities when it failed to speak up publicly in the hope of influencing world opinion.

A multitude of betrayals:

It is not far-fetched to say that the world has betrayed Rwanda countless times since its first confrontation with Europeans in the mid-1890s. This previous account has presented several of these betrayals before and during the genocide: by the Catholic Church, by the Belgian colonial power, by the French neo-colonial power, by the international community.

To exacerbate further this shameful record, we need to look at the past decade. First, the concept that the world owed serious reparations to a devastated Rwanda for its failure to prevent the genocide has been a total non-starter.

Second, there has been precious little accountability by the international community for its failure to prevent. The French government and the Roman Catholic Church have to this moment refused to acknowledge the slightest responsibility for their roles or to apologize for any of their gross errors of commission or omission. President Bill Clinton and Secretary-General Koki Annan have both apologized for their failure to offer protection, but have both falsely blamed insufficient information; in fact what was lacking was not knowledge - the situation was universally understood - but political will and sufficient national interest. No one has ever quit their jobs in protest against their government’s or their organisation’s failure to intervene to save close to one million innocent civilian lives.

Those we must not forget:

Finally, the very existence of the genocide has largely disappeared from the public and media’s consciousness. This is the latest betrayal. Marginalized during the genocide, Rwanda’s calamity is now largely forgotten except for Rwandans themselves and small clusters of non-Rwandans who have had some connection with the country or specialize in genocide prevention. That’s why I founded the Remembering Rwanda movement in July of 2001. I had four targets for remembering: the innocent victims; the survivors, many of whom live in deplorable conditions with few resources to tend to their physical or psychological needs; the perpetrators, most of whom remain free and unrepentant scattered around Africa, Europe and parts of North America; and the so-called “bystanders”, the unholy sextet named earlier. Rather than being passive witnesses, as the word “bystander” implies, all were active in their failure to intervene to stop the massacres, and all remain unaccountable to this day. It is time the Rwandan genocide is treated with the concern and attention it so grievously earned.

* Gerald Caplan is the author of Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide (2000), the report of the International Panel of Eminent Personalities appointed by the Organisation of African Unity to investigate the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, and the founder of "Remembering Rwanda: The Rwanda Genocide 10th Anniversary Memorial Project".

* NOTE FOR EDITORS: Please note that this editorial was commissioned from the author for Pambazuka News. If you would like to use this article for your publication, please do so with the following credit: "This article first appeared in Pambazuka News, an electronic newsletter for social justice in Africa, www.pambazuka.org" [2] Editors are also encouraged to make a donation.
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