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Cold Choices in Rwanda

What looks very much like genocide has been taking place in Rwanda. People are pulled from cars and buses, ordered to show their identity papers and then killed on the spot if they belong to the wrong ethnic group. Thousands of bodies have already piled up, and the killing continues despite the presence of 1,700 United Nations peacekeepers. The wider horror is that the world has few ways of responding effectively when violence within a nation leads to massacres and the breakdown of civil order.

The U.N. Security Council threw in the bloodied towel when it decided unanimously Thursday to cut back the blue-helmeted force to 270 soldiers in Kigali, the Rwandan capital. However morally unsettling, the pullout fairly reflects the unwillingness of most U.N. members to recruit a force big enough to stop a genocidal conflict. Most troubling of all is the uncertain fate of thousands of Rwandans who sought the protection of U.N. peacekeepers.

The choices were few and cold. The Security Council originally posted 2,500 blue helmets in Rwanda to oversee a peace agreement. Then fighting erupted on April 6, when a plane carrying the Presidents of Rwanda and neighboring Burundi mysteriously crashed. Both leaders were Hutus, the majority tribe in both countries, and the credible suspicion is that they were killed by Hutu hard-liners in Rwanda who oppose reconciliation with the Tutsi people. Everywhere in Rwanda, the Tutsi are now being targeted by Hutu extremists; as many as 5,000 sought sanctuary in the national stadium, another 5,000 are in a Kigali hospital, and about 300 are said to be in a hotel.

All these Rwandans who sought U.N. help could now be slaughtered, depending on who controls what part of the capital. Dismayed American officials take hope from reports that the stadium and hospital are under the control of rebel forces led by Tutsis. But this is meager solace, and human rights groups decry the abandonment of the innocent.

Yet what other choices really exist? Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali commands no troops and can only recommend military measures. Twenty-odd countries (but not the United States) furnished the 2,500 troops in the original Rwanda force. Each nation can instantly recall its own contingent, and Belgium, Bangladesh and Ghana, all major contributors, have already done so. It is legally if not morally easy to justify pulling out since the unevenly trained U.N. force was meant to police a peace, not take sides in a civil war. Somalia provides ample warning against plunging open-endedly into a "humanitarian" mission.

Given these circumstances, American diplomats argued in the end that keeping a U.N. presence, however reduced, was better than nothing. In the hard coin of reality, that may be so. But it is scant comfort to Rwandans who in good faith sought U.N. protection. The horrors in Kigali show the need for considering whether a mobile, quick-response force under U.N. aegis is needed to deal with such calamities. Absent such a force, the world has little choice but to stand aside and hope for the best.