

France's Killing Fields

Rosemary Richter

The Times, July 6, 1994

Paris is part of Rwanda's hell, says Rosemary Richter

Francois Mitterrand has lost none of his talent for showmanship. France's Socialist government refused almost to the last even to admit the possibility of a happy end to apartheid in South Africa. French backing for African National Congress radicals did nothing to ease the difficult negotiations between Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk. Yet there was the French President in Cape Town this week, with an entourage of 200, underlining France's claim to be the pre-eminent Western power in Africa by becoming the first Western head of state to be officially received by President Mandela.

For once, however, Mitterrand found himself on the defensive. At least half his press conference yesterday was spent justifying France's actions in Rwanda and being forced to listen to Mandela's oblique, but telling, criticisms of "unilateral" intervention in Africa.

What made this particularly galling was that Mitterrand's strategic goal is to fold South Africa into la grande famille franco-africaine the web of alliances through which France binds to itself African countries which contain, at least theoretically, four times as many French-speakers as are found in France. Hence the pressing invitation to Mandela to attend this year's Franco-African summit. Quite apart from the language barrier, French involvement in South Africa is negligible. That does not diminish French interest in associating the new South Africa with its mission civilisatrice. But the French interpretation of this "mission" in Rwanda should warn Mandela to keep his distance.

In times of crises the French press is a wonder to behold, but the government line that its abrupt decision to rush French troops to Rwanda was an unalloyed act of mercy has been too much for all but the most loyal French journalists to swal-

low. France, after all, voted with the rest to pull the United Nations out of Rwanda after April 6. Mitterrand discovered that “every hour counts” only after 500,000 Tutsi had already been slaughtered at the instigation of men armed and trained by France and when the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front, which French troops had helped to beat back in the past, was closing in on the capital, Kigali. Paris could hardly claim to be neutral, given 20 years of unwavering French support for the Hutu dictator, President Habyarimana, and France’s close links with the “interim government” which planned the massacres.

That government is now holed up in a comfortable hotel on the Rwandan border, under French protection. French troops “negotiate” with local strongmen, such as the prefect of Kibuye, clearly identified as leaders of the massacre. And without clearance from the UN, France has now declared a “safe haven” in the southwest safe from the advancing RPF, and thus safe for the murderers. Well may the French Foreign Minister say that France is “not at war” and has no war aims. It has put its troops in the line of fire against the Tutsi-led RPF men whom French officials used to describe as khmers noirs and can hardly escape the charge of throwing its old allies a lifeline, in the full knowledge of their genocidal guilt. By insisting that the two sides must now nego-

tiate, France is behaving as though neither side is in the wrong. It is also behaving in high disregard of the facts on the ground. An RPF victory could end Rwanda’s horror, and France is obstructing it.

A few years ago, in the wake of the Carrefour aid scandal and under pressure from African democratic movements, France overhauled its African policy. The new strategy, dubbed *Paristroika*, broke with the French practice of protecting its “sons of bitches”, the dictators who rewarded France with unfailing support for French diplomatic initiatives elsewhere. France would seem to have nothing to gain by throwing this strategy out of the window, in a country of no strategic importance, in order to prop up an appalling regime which has murdered Hutu moderates and human rights advocates as well as the Tutsi.

The most charitable explanation is cynical enough : French officials privately say that since half the Tutsi have been murdered and four-fifths of the remaining population are therefore Hutu, the only hope for stability in Rwanda is a Hutu government. There would be a dreadful price to pay for such “stability” : Africans who want to keep “minorities” under control would draw the lesson that the most efficient method was to murder so many that they become demographically insignificant. But another, still more cynical, ex-

planation suggests itself. The RPF's leaders grew up in exile in Uganda. They are largely Anglophone. Donc, ils ne passeront pas.

The French position, untenable now, will become more so within days, when the RPF forms a government of national unity, including Hutus belonging to the democratic opposition to Habyarimana's regime who escaped the manhunt. France's best course would be to re-

cognise this government immediately and hand over the men who organised the massacres to internationally monitored trials. The RPF would then probably accept France's continued "humanitarian" presence until it could be relieved by UN reinforcements. Had France offered them a few cargo planes and troop carriers, of course, they could have achieved the ostensible French goal : saving lives.