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The Rwandan Genocide Revisited

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by **Robert E. Gribbin**

Twenty-five years ago, in April 1994, the havoc of genocide visited Rwanda. In a three-month-long paroxysm of violence, almost a million souls died. The country was devastated, the remaining population cowed, government non-existent, and the economy in shambles.

Today, Rwanda has bounced back. It is an economic success, politically stable and mildly progressive. It delivered victors' justice to perpetrators of genocide. It has prohibited ethnic labels and has become a more responsible regional partner. Politics, however, are tightly controlled by the ruling clique led by President Paul Kagame. American relations with Rwanda are good. The U.S. was helpful in redressing the wounds of genocide and in encouraging the nation to focus on rural development, political and civil imperatives. As true elsewhere, American counsel was not always welcomed or followed. Nonetheless, today the U.S. and Rwanda have a mature, mutually satisfactory relationship.

During my diplomatic career I was involved in Rwanda as desk officer, Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) in Kigali, DCM in Kampala, Uganda during the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) invasion and, finally, as ambassador in Kigali. However, in April 1994 I was ambassador in Bangui, Central African Republic. News of the shooting down of President Habyarimana's aircraft on April 6 was followed by reports of wide-spread violence. Embassy Kigali quickly went dark as all personnel evacuated to Burundi. Soon no one from the outside world was left in Kigali to observe and report. French military aircraft from Bangui evacuated French personnel from Kigali. I learned that Madame Habyarimana and her family transited Bangui en route to Paris courtesy of the French Air Force and that her husband's remains had been left at Gbadolite in neighboring Zaire with President Mobutu.

As diplomatic reporting and news



evaporated, I consulted regularly with local Rwandan friends, one Hutu and two Tutsi, all of whom tracked events as best they could. They were terrified by what information did filter out. The situation was grim, but slowly during April and May the magnitude of the catastrophe was revealed. A methodical genocide was underway, a sponsored deliberate effort to murder a million people on account of their ethnicity. Even as those facts emerged, the international community – including especially the United States – refused to recognize reality. At few times in history has the U.S. government looked so inept and feckless by refusing even to use the word “genocide” to characterize events.



A French soldier accompanies a convoy of Europeans to the airport in Kigali, April 12, 1994. Reuters

Policy Vacuum

American policy makers in the Clinton administration were new to the job. They were hamstrung by a policy of “non-interference, except when U.S. national security was at stake” adopted in the waning days of the Bush administration as a result of the debacle of Black Hawk Down in Somalia. Certainly, no one made the argument that American national security was at risk in Rwanda. Initially no one was willing to think outside that box. The tone was set the day after the genocide began when Secretary Christopher, on his own counsel, acceded to the withdrawal of the Belgian battalion from the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR). Nebulous dithering characterized internal U.S. deliberations for weeks.

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

19-Apr-1994 13:27 EDT

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

MEMORANDUM FOR:

Susan E. Rice
Donald K. Steinberg

(RICE)
(STEINBERG)

FROM: Eric P. Schwartz
(SCHWARTZ)

SUBJECT: PULL-OUT OF UNAMIR

I just heard from Human Rights Watch, pleading that we oppose a quick UNAMIR pull-out from Rwanda. Human Rights Watch seemed to indicate that UNAMIR is protecting thousands (25,000?) Rwandans and if they pull out, the Rwandans will quickly become victims of genocide.

Is this true? If so, shouldn't it be a major factor informing high-level decision-making on this issue? Has it been?

I am expecting to receive a fax on this shortly and will see that you get it.

Eric

White House email from Eric Schwartz to Susan Rice and Donald Steinberg warning of possible genocide, April 19, 1994, declassified by the Clinton Library in response to National Security Archive request.

However, soon images of scores of bloated bodies floating down the Akagera River and reports of thousands of dead murdered by the road side, in churches, and in homes galvanized the world to action. The UN peace keeping operation, hamstrung by the withdrawal of the Belgium battalion when the violence started, was further thwarted by the Security Council's inability to reconstitute it effectively. In June France stepped into the gap, advising it would send a force to restore order. An undertaking the Council reluctantly approved.

On June 22, only hours after the UNSC vote, a telephone call woke me up about midnight. A colonel from French headquarters in Bangui advised that French aircraft were on the ground in Goma and Bukavu and troops would move into Rwanda at dawn. In turn I advised the State operations center of the notice. The senior watch officer told me my information could not be true. "Why?" I asked. He replied, "Because the U.S. has not been contacted by the French in Paris." Astounded, I told him to blame it on me, but to be sure to put it in the morning brief.

Operation Turquoise was not a success. By the time the French arrived, much of the killing was already done. The Rwandan Patriotic Army occupied half of the nation. A million Hutu peasants fled advancing troops to Tanzania and a million others were departing for Zaire. The French occupied the southwestern quadrant of the country, where they did protect some Tutsi from death, but their control there also permitted much of the *genocidaire* military and power structure to flee safely to Zaire. Over the next few years *genocidaire* elements would agitate the region by mounting an insurgency back into Rwanda. *Genocidaire* control of vast refugee camps and their enduring presence just across the border posed a national security threat to Rwanda and was the root cause for two wars in eastern Congo, where unrest continues today.

The Toll of Genocide

Kigali fell to the RPA on July 4 and by July 15 the genocide was over. The tally was enormous. About 800,000 people died, identified and sought out on account of ethnicity. No place was safe. Homes were invaded; citizens were killed at road blocks or in places of refuge – churches, stadiums or government centers. Victims were hacked to pieces, bludgeoned to death, raped by militia thugs. The few lucky ones were shot or killed by grenades thrown into crowded sites. As many as a half million residents were complicit in the murders. About three million people were displaced, some internally, but most in refugee camps in Tanzania and Zaire. The nation was prostrate. There was no government. The educated class – civil servants, teachers, health workers, etc. were gone – either dead or in exile. The victorious, mostly Tutsi, Rwandan Patriotic Army filled the void. Even as the dust settled, the RPA too engaged in atrocities and retributions, documentation for which is scant. Meanwhile, the political wing, the Rwanda Patriotic Front, took the reins of government and began a process to reconstitute government, rebuild human and physical infrastructure, return refugees, deliver justice, wipe out genocide sentiment, and promote reconciliation. Intertwined in these noble goals was the underlying mantra of “never again”. And to ensure never again, the new Tutsi rulers insisted upon Tutsi control of the security and political apparatus.

The Aftermath

American policy had shifted by this time. Leaders – President Clinton, Madeleine Albright, Tony Lake, Brian Atwood and Susan Rice – acknowledged the terrible error of not recognizing genocide or trying to stop it. Consequently, efforts were underway to support the new regime in Kigali across the spectrum of issues – justice, returns of refugees, rebuilding the economy, reconstituting government, demining and military assistance. I was to have solid support as I began my ambassadorial assignment in 1996.

I arrived as ambassador in January, presented my credentials to President Bizimungu on the first morning, then hosted Senator Nancy Kassebaum. We traveled to isolated Nyarubuye parish church where thousands had been slaughtered. Their unburied desiccated corpses stacked like cordwood in church buildings gave mute witness to the terrors inflicted. This sobering experience drove home the horror of genocide and provided me with some understanding of the intensity of the “never again” mantra.



Refugees wait for relief food from the Red Cross near the border between Rwanda and Tanzania, May 1994. Reuters

Over the next few years the U.S. government worked closely with the victorious RPF government to accomplish mutual goals. We helped reconstitute the judicial system. We reorganized ministries, provided succor – food, tools, seeds and housing materials to returnees, empowered women headed households, demined conflict zones, supported UN human rights and justice initiatives and promoted reconciliation. I also argued for tolerance, cessation of military abuses against civilians, and expanding the political pie.



On July 22, 1994, President Clinton announced Operation Support Hope, a U.S. military effort to provide aid to the millions of Hutu refugees who poured into Zaire. Source: Christian Science Monitor

In addition to reconstructing a working government, economy, and society, the Rwandan government focused on national security issues, especially eradication of insurgency spilling over from Zaire. The dismantling of the refugee camps in 1996 carried the anti-*genocidaire* effort to Zaire; this resulted initially in the ouster of Mobutu, then when Kabila proved unacceptable, an effort to overthrow him. The impact of Rwanda's extra-border activities had immediate fallout for relations with the United States, halting nascent military cooperation. Nonetheless, Rwandan leaders

remained convinced as to the validity of their commitment to eliminate all vestiges of genocide, both externally and internally. Remembering the failure of the international community to halt the genocide – and often playing that card on us – leaders stubbornly forged ahead to create the new Rwanda they imagined.

The new Rwanda was to be different, a society free from ethnicity. A society not encumbered by the narrative of ethnic differences and strife. It was to be a modern state with a viable economy where citizens could realize their individual potential. Yet to move ahead on these goals, the leadership, then firmly under the thumb of Vice President Paul Kagame, who became president in 2001, reverted to use of control mechanisms deeply rooted in Rwandan culture. Traditionally, Rwandan society was highly regimented and hierarchal. People knew their place and respected and obeyed their superiors. It was this ethic of subservience that rendered the genocide so effective. People did what they were told. They were told to fear and then kill Tutsi on account of years of oppression. So they did. Now the new government opened re-education camps to revise the narrative. Ethnic differences were the fault of colonizers. Rwandans historically lived in harmony. Ethnic tags were dropped. Henceforth all citizens were "Rwandans". Espousing genocide, advocating a countervailing theory of the violence, or denying "genocide against the Tutsi" were unacceptable, leading to loss of status, land, jobs, ostracism, imprisonment or

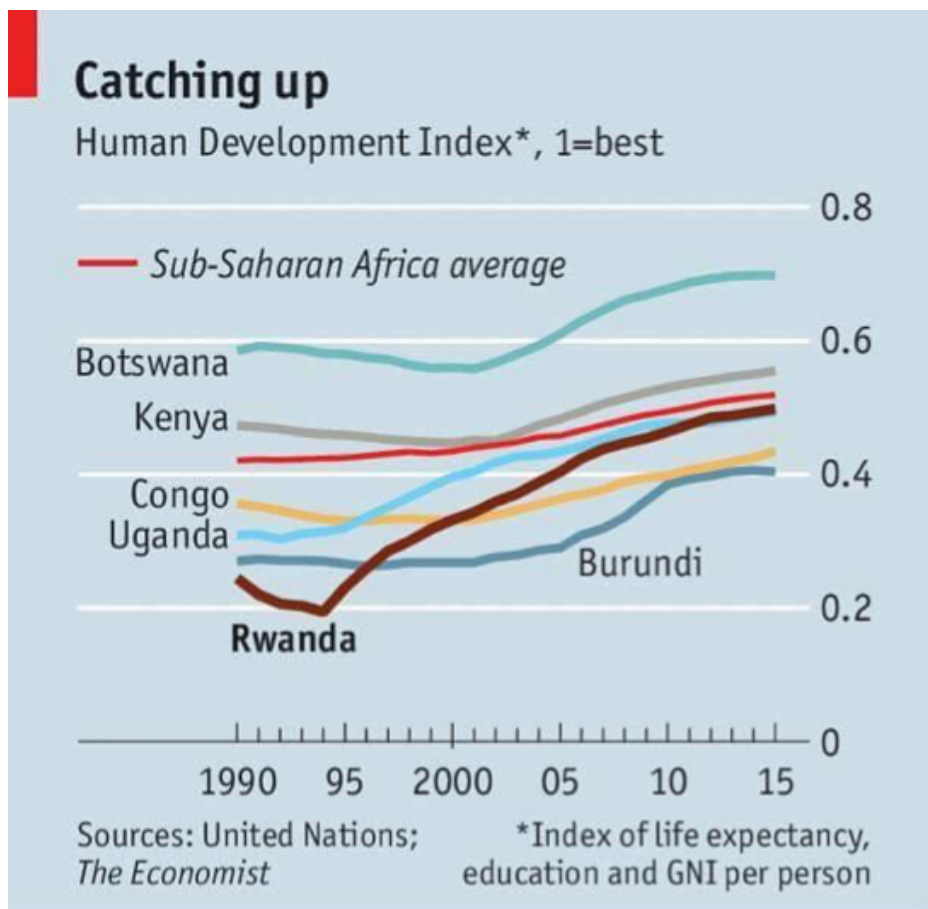
worse. Indeed the charge of genocide participation or denial has been used effectively by the Rwandan leadership for the past twenty-five years to stifle dissent.

Upon taking power in 1995, the Tutsi victors quickly adopted the power-sharing formula set forth in the never-implemented Arusha Accords. All the non-*genocidare* parties got parliamentary seats and positions in the cabinet. Quickly the new government was majority Hutu; even President Pasteur Bizimungu, although a RPF stalwart, was Hutu. Although an encouraging start, reality was that the Tutsi military power structure dominated. Soon defections and expulsions began, first of Prime Minister Twagiramungu, followed by other Hutu cooperators, then a slew of Tutsi insiders. Subsequently manipulated elections and intimidation cleansed the ranks of all principled opposition. Even though Rwanda now boasts the most women in parliament of any nation in the world and some power has devolved downward to localities, there can be no realistic challenge to President Kagame, who has been re-elected three times. So rather than gradually expand the political envelope, Rwanda has kept it narrow.

Progress Over the Years

Economic and social indicators demonstrate Rwanda has moved forward remarkably well in the past twenty-five years. GDP grew at over five percent per year, reaching 8% in 2017. Rwanda expanded high-end agriculture exports, especially coffee. It increased overall agriculture productivity through more and better inputs, but small plots circumscribe large scale mechanization. There is a growing middle class, including many Hutu, and the beginnings of high tech in call centers, software startups, and international banking. Gorilla tourism has flourished. Rwanda undoubtedly benefited from illegal exploitation of mineral resources, gold and coltan, from neighboring Congo. Rwanda joined the East African Community and strengthened trading links with neighbors.

Primary school enrollment is above 90 %, but the level of instruction in rural zones is poor. Urban standards are better. Secondary and college numbers are also way up. Health indicators are also improved. Life expectancy has risen to male 66/female 70. Most children are immunized. Malaria and HIV are at bay, but population growth continues apace. Over half of the nation's 12 million people are under twenty-five, with no personal memory of the genocide. Reflecting an orderly society is an orderly environment. Rwanda banned plastic bags. Kigali's streets are swept clean on a weekly basis.



Economist.com

As is true in every nation, the blessings of economic progress are not shared equitably. The new ruling elite, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, its military leadership and progeny are the major beneficiaries. Rural peasants, hemmed in by lack of land, insufficient education, and few opportunities, are stuck in an endless – and worsening – cycle of poverty. One of the most densely populated nations of the world with almost 12 million inhabitants, Rwanda's farm size might total only an acre or two. What are families to do when sons need land? Government edicts to prohibit further sub-division, establish housing standards (a house is necessary for a man to marry), and to grow coffee, not food, lead to quiet frustrations and unrest. Another government policy, raising the marrying age to 18, has unintentionally generated a cadre of unhappy young women whose prospects for marriage (no eligible men with houses) and families are limited. Education success is also hampered by the fact that there are few jobs for graduates in rural areas, which leads to expanding rates of urban migration and unemployment.

Internationally, Rwanda refurbished its reputation. It has evolved from a regional trouble maker arising from military undertakings in the Congo, where it still keeps a careful eye on developments, to become a stalwart participant in African peacekeeping operations. The well-disciplined RPA, renamed the Rwandan Defense Force, has proved itself a competent partner in UN peacekeeping forces in Darfur and South Sudan. In recognition of Rwanda's more mature regional role, President Paul

Kagame was elected to chair the African Union in 2018.

By 2000, American policy towards Rwanda was settling into the continental norm, which continues today. We maintain an active USAID program focused on rural development. We work to combat HIV/AIDS and malaria. We restarted the Peace Corps. We applaud Rwanda's pragmatic economic and trade policies. Even while recognizing the legacy of genocide, we seek greater respect for civil rights and democratic processes. We protested Rwanda's mischief making in neighboring Congo, but appreciate its positive peacekeeping role elsewhere in Africa.

Prognosis for the Future?

So what is the verdict twenty-five years after the genocide? First, if the *genocidaires* had won, the resulting government would certainly have become an international pariah. Ultimately, the international community would probably have been compelled to take action against it. But that did not happen. Instead a largely Tutsi army and its political leaders took power after a calamitous genocide and pledged that such an event would never happen again. To the victors the spoils. Confident in their vision and goals, disdaining outside advice and eschewing internal counsel, the new rulers reshaped the nation to conform to their view. Their vision is a society where economic and social progress obviates old divisions. That entity is Rwanda today. It is stable, economically sound and mildly progressive. Certainly the issue of overt ethnicity has been put to rest. The vision is overseen by a narrow cadre of believers around President Kagame that hew carefully to the "never again" mantra. This group is determined to stay in control and have structured the state apparatus to that end. There is relentless oversight. Opposition is squashed.

So the question remains, how long can this last? Hidden ethnic tensions – and there are certainly still some however mightily the government tries to sweep them under the rug – are being replaced by class tensions: haves versus have-nots (where unfortunately almost all Tutsi and many Hutu are haves and almost all have-nots are Hutu). But how this political/economic dynamic might be mobilized remains to be seen. For the time being, certainly for this generation and probably the next, Rwanda has achieved what author Susan Thompson has dubbed a "precarious peace." Only time will tell whether progress towards prosperity can override the reality of third world poverty and the lingering impact of genocide.*



Source: Global Research

Robert E. Gribbin served as U.S. Ambassador to Rwanda (1995-99) and Central African Republic (1992-95). Other diplomatic assignments included earlier postings in Bangui and Kigali as well as tours in Kampala, Uganda, Mombasa, Kenya and in the Department of State in the African Bureau. He was a four-time delegate to UN Human Rights Commission, also twice to the UN General Assembly. Since retiring, Ambassador Gribbin has undertaken short term assignments as chargé d'affaires in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Burundi, Djibouti, Chad and Mauritius and other postings in South Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana and Liberia. He is the author of a memoir *In Aftermath of Genocide: the U.S. Role in Rwanda* and two novels: *State of Decay* and *Murder in Mombasa*. Currently, Gribbin writes, blogs (www.rwandakenya.blogspot.com), lectures, plays golf, and sails.



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