

THE ARMING OF RWANDA, AND THE GENOCIDE

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In the book *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*, the authors, Barabara Harff and Ted Gurr state that the World War II holocaust should have enlightened the world as to what ethnic and religious hatred can do when used by unscrupulous leaders armed with exclusionary ideologies. They point out that many people hoped that with the end of colonialism, Africa could look forward to a better world in which nation-states would guarantee and protect the basic freedoms of their peoples. Harff and Gurr pose a question:

when the United Nations came into existence, were we wrong to believe that a new world order would emerge, one in which minimum standards of global justice would be observed and violators punished? Is it still possible that a civil society will emerge in which citizens eschew narrow ethnic interests in favour of global issues?¹

While the authors' concerns are legitimate, it is true, as they later acknowledge, that some progress has been made to check ethnic wars since the mid-1990s. However, the world badly needs more innovative ideas about how to fight these scourges, which continue to plague mankind.

Article I of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948 requires that state parties consider genocide a crime, which they under-

take to prevent and punish. This includes conspiracy to commit genocide, attempts to commit genocide, and direct public incitement to commit genocide. Rwanda acceded to the Convention in 1975.²

It has been said many times that the murder of close to one million people in Rwanda was preventable.³ Certainly the onslaught that began in Rwanda in 1994 could have been abated if serious measures had been put in place early enough. Much of the blame for the genocide that followed has been ascribed to the international community's failure to intervene. However, many of the contributing factors have yet to be explored. For example, the question of how weapons reached the hands of the perpetrators remains unanswered. Who provided the missiles that shot down the plane carrying the then presidents of Rwanda and Burundi, Juvenal Habyarimana and Cyprien Ntaryamira, on 6 April 1994? As Rwanda commemorates the ten-year anniversary of the 100 days of atrocities that followed, mystery still surrounds the identity and motivations of the instigators of that human catastrophe.

The Arusha Peace Accords, which were signed on 4 August 1993, raised hopes that an end to the three-year war between the government and the then rebel forces of the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) was in sight.

The Accords included a power-sharing arrangement that would lead to multi-party rule in Rwanda, which would pave the way for a transition to democracy. A United Nations (UN) peacekeeping force was included in the provisions of the Accords, with the aim of stabilizing the situation in Rwanda during the transition to peace. The Accords also bound the parties to the upholding of the Ceasefire Agreement of 16 September 1991. The terms of the Agreement included suspension of supplies of ammunition and weaponry to the field, and bans on both the infiltration of troops and the conveyance of troops and war materiel to the area occupied by each party.

However, despite the Agreement, in January 1994 a Human Rights Watch report on Rwanda observed that the country was being flooded with weapons. These were so readily available that anyone could exchange two beers for a grenade.⁴ According to the report, France, Egypt and South Africa were the principal sources of arms shipments to the Rwandan army during this period. Prunier, in his book *The Rwanda crisis: history of a genocide*, states that "a few weeks [prior] to the outbreak of genocide, arms had become plentiful in Rwanda, grenades were sold alongside mangoes and avocados on fruit stands at markets around Kigali."⁵ He adds that UN Mission in Rwanda (UNMIR) officials were aware of, but could not cope with or monitor, the scale of illicit arms trading.

Prior to the start of the genocide, the government is said to have played an active role in arming certain of the (already polarized) citizens, purportedly against the threat of invasion from outside forces. The real aim, according to a secret government document, was to distribute close to 2,000 assault rifles to civilians loyal to the president's political party (*Movement Révolutionnaire National pour le Développement—MRPD*), under the guise of "self-defence."⁶ High-ranking officials also armed citizens and members of the militia, and traded weapons for tea.⁷ Although during the orgy of killing that followed machetes were the most commonly used weapons, large-scale massacres were carried out with automatic rifles and hand grenades.

According to the UN High Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), while people were frequently hacked to death by machetes or other non-ballistic weapons, the victims were often rounded up by being threatened with firearms.⁸

While commenting on the proliferation of weapons in Rwanda prior to the genocide, Jacques Castonguay records that "...assault rifles, guns and grenades were distributed throughout 1993. Some militia leaders were issued with AK 47s, for which they had to fill in requisition forms; the distribution of grenades required no such paperwork. By the time genocide began, some 85 tons of munitions are thought to have been distributed throughout the country."⁹ In the same vein, Linda Melvern, in her comment "*Arming Rwanda*,"¹⁰ writes that during 1993, the year that the Arusha Accords were negotiated, a project began to import into Rwanda a huge number of machetes and other agricultural tools. Melvern notes that the purchase of these tools took place in eighteen separate deals, and by companies not usually associated with agriculture. As well as machetes they imported razor blades, nails, hoes, hammers and shears; and that these tools entered Rwanda under government import licenses headed "eligible imports". Melvern concludes that in the three years from October 1990, Rwanda, one of the poorest countries in the world, became the third largest importer of weapons in Africa, spending an estimated \$US 112 million.¹¹

According to the report published by the Human Rights Watch Arms Project, "*Arming Rwanda*", France was a principal source of arms for the Rwanda government. The report discloses that in June 1993, the Rwandan Minister of Defence confirmed that a French bank, *Crédit Lyonnais*, had guaranteed a \$6 million arms deal between the Rwandan government and the government of Egypt that involved the transfer of heavy artillery, mortars and Kalashnikov automatic rifles (AK-47). Four years later, in 1998, a French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, carried an article declaring that the serial numbers of the two surface-to-air missiles that had struck the aeroplane carrying the two presidents matched those of missiles

seized from Iraq by French troops during the Gulf War of 1989–1991.¹² The reporter, Patrick de Saint-Exupery, also disclosed that his sources were some French soldiers, who had claimed that after the missiles had been confiscated from the Iraqi stockpiles, they had been sold to Rwandan government forces. This had occurred between 1993–1994 as part of a covert French policy (*le secret de défense*).¹³ The government of France denied the story published in *Le Figaro*, and accused the American State Department of having supplied the missiles, arguing that American, not French, forces in the Gulf had seized the two missiles and sold them to Uganda. The US rebutted this charge.¹⁴

Although the origin of the arms supplied to that country has not yet been traced, Rwanda is just one of several states in Africa in which the number of small arms and light weapons sold to a country plagued by ethnic, nationalist or religious strife has had disastrous effects. Stephen Goose and Frank Smyth postulate that the post-Cold War era has seen profit motives replace East–West rivalry as the main stimulus behind weapons sales. Countries that were members of the Warsaw Pact and North Atlantic Trade Organization (NATO) have been selling off their arsenals on open markets, with the result that the prices of some weapons, such as AK-47s, have fallen below cost.¹⁵ The two authors also claim that many developing countries have joined in the trade in light weapons and small arms. The difficulty in tracing such arms dealings is that governments rarely disclose the details of their transfers of small arms and light weapons.

The overall result, however, is that weapons flood strife-torn regions, not only fanning warfare but also undermining international efforts to embargo arms and to compel the opposing parties to respect human rights. Goose and Smyth conclude that if more had been known about the flow of arms into Rwanda, and if the international community had had the opportunity to stop the influx of arms, or at least to make sure that the arms suppliers made trade with individual countries conditional on their human rights performance, the outcome might have been different.

Conclusion

The ten-year commemoration ceremony of the genocide in Rwanda hit the world's media headlines, with TV channels showing the massed skulls of the victims. However, little was said about the need to know how the weapons used in the genocide got into Rwanda. A truth and reconciliation process has been recommended as a possible first step towards healing for the Rwandan people. But will truth and reconciliation prove a therapy, or will it be a mockery of justice and a warrant for vengeance? How will healing take place in an atmosphere enshrouded in secrecy, fear and assumptions? One of the relatives of the victims remarked, after the confessions of a former genocidaire,

...he didn't kill only two. He killed at least six in my family and others too. He killed my brothers, the wives of my brothers and my nieces. I did not forgive him because I think he is insincere, I forgave him because the church told me.¹⁶

For many of the survivors, the genocide lives on.

The availability and misuse of small arms present a serious challenges to the international community. During the UN Conference on Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons In All Its Aspects, held in New York in 2001, the participating states recognized that

the excessive accumulation and uncontrolled spread of small arms in many regions of the world...pose a serious threat to ...safety, security, stability and sustainable development at the individual, local, national, regional and international levels.¹⁷

Except in the case of weapons of mass destruction, there are relatively few binding international restrictions on the right of states to transfer arms. Perhaps the most important of those that exist at the global level are the embargoes imposed by the UN Security Council on particular groups or states, which are binding on all member states. However, although the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade In Small Arms and Light Weapons In all

Its Aspects contains a series of commitments at the national, regional and global levels, the programme is not legally binding.

The 2000 UN Conference proposed several solutions to the problem posed by small arms and light weapons. Among them are:

- the need for international assistance (both financial and technical) to the countries most affected;
- the marking and tracing of weapons;
- effective disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes;
- mandatory import and export controls of small arms;
- the regulation of arms brokering through strict legislation;
- information exchange as a means of building confidence among states;
- export criteria aimed at prohibiting arms transfers to zones of conflict/repressive regimes;
- the involvement of civil society (in raising awareness of the dangers of small arms and promoting a culture of peace);
- stockpile management and security;
- the regulation and licensing of civilian possession of small arms and weapons;
- the collection and destruction of weapons;
- the criminalization of illicit activity concerning small arms and weapons;
- co-operation among law enforcement agencies (including customs officials);
- the introduction of national legislative measures (to control legal small arms at the national level); and
- improved compliance with arms embargoes.¹⁸

On 7 September 1995, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution to establish an international commission of inquiry into the sale and supply of arms and related material to the former government forces in Rwanda, in violation of the UN embargo implemented on 17 May 1994 (UNSC Resolution 1013, of 1995). The commission has submitted an interim report on its findings and conclu-

sions, which includes recommendations on measures to end the illegal flow of arms into the Great Lakes region.

Notes

1. B Harff and T Robert, *Ethnic conflict in world politics*, Westview Press, Oxford, 2004, pp 1-19:1.
2. The Convention entered into force on 12 January 1951. For the text and list of countries that have ratified it, see UN Treaty Series, vol. 78.
3. The majority of the victims were Tutsi.
4. Arming Rwanda: the arms trade and human rights abuses in the Rwandan war, Human Rights Watch Arms Project 6, January 1994.
5. G Prunier, *The Rwandan Crisis: History of a Genocide*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, pp 148-9.
6. See Walter Dorn, Jonathan Matloff and Jennifer Matthews, Preventing the bloodbath: could the UN have predicted and prevented the Rwanda genocide? *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 2000 <http://www.rmc.ca/academic/gradrech/dorn4_e.html> (3 August 2004).
7. G Prunier, op cit, pp 148-9.
8. International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), *Rwanda anniversary is a bitter reminder of small arms threats*, <<http://www.iansa.org>> (8 April 2004).
9. J Castonguay, *Les Casques Bleus au Rwanda*, Paris, Editions l'Harmattan, 1998, p 68.
10. L Melvern, *Conspiracy to Murder – The Rwandan Genocide*, London, Verso Publishers, 2004, p 56.
11. Ibid, pp 56-57.
12. P de Saint-Exupery, *La France et le Rwanda: nouvelles revelations*, *Le Figaro*, 31 March 1998.
13. Ibid.
14. S Phillip, Fateful crash in Africa: link to US is denied, *New York Times*, 7 April 1998.
15. S Goose and F Smyth, *Arming genocide in Rwanda*, <<http://franksmyth.com/clients/FrankSmyth/franks.nsf/0/>>, (8 April 2004).
16. C McGreal, 10 years after Rwanda genocide, *New Vision*, Kampala, <<http://allafrica.com/stories/200404070504.html>>, (8 April 2004).
17. See *Small Arms Survey* 2003, p 156.
18. Ibid, pp 231-2.
19. See David Millwood, The international response to conflict and genocide: lessons from the Rwanda experience, *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, 14 April 1996, Annex 2.