

Anatomy of a Massacre

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The organized massacres in Rwanda began on April 6. A 2,500-member United Nations observer force was present at the time, but without Chapter Seven authorization to use force. Chapter Seven of the United Nations Charter allows "such action as may be necessary" to respond to any "threat to the peace, breach of peace, or act of aggression."

From the moment the massacres began -- committed mostly by Hutu militia against members of the minority Tutsi tribe and the moderate Hutu opposition -- the disaster still unfolding in Rwanda has been a case study of international failure. Without the mandate to act under Chapter Seven, what is the U.N.'s purpose in Rwanda? How can the international community respond in the future to crises on this scale?

The U.N. has authorized the use of force sparingly: during the Korean War, in the Congo, for the U.S.-led coalition that fought Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait, for the U.S.-led forces in Somalia, as well as for the U.N. troops who replaced them. Force is also authorized for some of the missions that the U.N. has been assigned in the former Yugoslavia (although it has rarely been used).

Such a consensus has failed to develop behind military intervention in Rwanda. After Belgium decided in mid-April to recall its 440 troops from the U.N.'s observer force, when 10 of its soldiers were killed by Hutu extremists, the remaining troops stayed in their barracks. The U.N. Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, recommended to the Security

Council that the entire observer force be withdrawn. Such a retreat was considered to be too great an embarrassment, so the Security Council voted to allow 270 troops to remain.

The Organization of African Unity criticized the U.N.'s decision to withdraw all but a symbolic force as "a sign of indifference or lack of sufficient concern" for Africans. Yet not a single African country sent new or additional troops to Rwanda, except for a Senegalese unit that later joined the much-criticized French forces. A week after the killing began, estimates of those massacred reached 20,000, then 50,000.

By April 29, three weeks after the killing started, Mr. Boutros-Ghali reported that as many as 200,000 people had been killed. By now having reversed his recommendation of early April to withdraw the peacekeeping troops, he asked for Security Council approval of a plan to send in 5,500 additional troops, still without the provision to use force.

Again, Security Council members from African countries and other developing nations favored more forceful action. But the U.S. opposed the Secretary General's proposal and no African nation volunteered troops. A resolution was not passed until May 17, by which time senior aid officials in Rwanda were quoting a figure of half a million dead.

The major reason for U.S. opposition was President Clinton's admonition that the U.N. has to learn "when to say no." The United States, the Administration warned, would only agree to U.N.-authorized troops under certain conditions, demanding to know in advance, for example, who would contribute the troops, where they would be deployed and what their roles would be. But another reason was the cost: the U.S. would have to bear some 30 percent of the eventual expense for any new peacekeeping deployment while already deep in debt for past assessments.

On May 25, Mr. Boutros-Ghali announced his failure to raise contributions of military forces from U.N. members. Meanwhile, the U.S. Government had instructed its spokesmen not to label the deaths in Rwanda genocide, since doing so would have made it more difficult to stand aside and watch the slaughter continue. Two days later, President Clinton met with Mr. Boutros-Ghali and declined to commit any U.S. troops.

On June 3, the leaders of 14 African states, stung by Mr. Boutros-Ghali's remark that the situation was "a scandal," offered to send troop contingents -- at some indeterminate time, after they were armed and supplied by Security Council members. For its part, the Defense Department consumed weeks in disputing with the U.N. the level of repayment that it should receive for supplying 50 armored personnel carriers. In mid-June, the department was still demanding that the U.S. be reimbursed \$15 million for shipping spare parts and equipment to and from Rwanda. The vehicles did not arrive until mid-July. Estimates of the dead had now reached 500,000 to 800,000.

On July 20, with a cholera epidemic spreading among the 1.2 million refugees who fled into Zaire after the victory of the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Clinton Administration announced that 4,000 U.S. troops would aid the relief effort. On Friday, Mr. Clinton asked Congress for \$270 million to help the refugees, and ordered a detachment of 200 American troops into Rwanda to open the airport in Kigali for relief flights. At the same time, U.N. officials were faced with deciding whether it was safe to urge the refugees to return to Rwanda and whether a costly repatriation effort would divert resources from the camps in Zaire. All of this, four months after the troops and money could have prevented the catastrophe in the first place.

The history of the disaster in Rwanda proves the necessity for a new U.N. policy on catastrophic deaths of civilians. The U.N. should adopt automatic thresholds of civilian casualties that would compel deployment of large

multinational forces within a matter of days. There are two circumstances in which this should be considered a mandatory requirement: outright massacres of civilian populations and premeditated actions that lead to large-scale civilian starvation during war or armed conflict.

Any deployment of troops would have to take place under Chapter Seven, giving them the mandate to use deadly force without waiting for the approval of the combatants or of the government in power. Two sides warring for supreme power or slaughtering their own populations will not suddenly agree to invite in U.N. forces.

The U.N. observer mission that was in Rwanda when the killing started should have immediately been supported by substantial reinforcements from other nations. And the Security Council quickly should have authorized it to use force. Nations that feared France's motives for sending in peacekeeping troops could have resolved such doubts by joining the French in contingents of equal size.

Until the great powers in the Security Council are willing to act together, and to absorb comparatively small numbers of casualties to prevent the large-scale slaughter of innocent people, there will continue to be after-the-fact hand-wringing and emergency aid efforts. And once again it will have been too late for everything except the grief.

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