

**Rwanda: Lessons Learned (Human
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1.1 Ten Years After the Genocide

March 29, 2004

In the ten years since the Rwandan genocide, leaders of national governments and international institutions have acknowledged the shame of having failed to stop the slaughter of the Tutsi population. At the international conference on genocide prevention in Stockholm in January, many renewed their commitment to halting any future genocide. Honoring that pledge will require not just exerting greater political will than seen in the past, but also developing a strategy built on the lessons of 1994, such as those given below.

Lesson One: Stop the genocide before it becomes a genocide.

The genocide in Rwanda began suddenly after the killing of the president, but the attitudes and practices that made it possible developed over a period of years.

For decades, the government had practiced discrimination against Tutsi, the people who would be targeted during the genocide. The post-independence government categorized citizens by ethnicity and, continuing a practice of the Belgian colonial regime, required all adults to carry documents identifying their ethnic group. These identity documents were used to select Tutsi for slaughter during the genocide.

During the three years before the 1994 genocide, government officials, soldiers, national police, and leaders of political parties incited and directed sixteen massacres of Tutsi, each of which killed hundreds of unarmed civilians. The army also killed hundreds of Hima, a people related to Tutsi, during a military operation in 1990. In addition, authorities permitted and in some cases encouraged violence against supporters of rival political parties.

Killers and other assailants went unpunished if their victims were Tutsi or members of parties opposed to the authorities.

The international community, including national and multinational donors, occasionally expressed concern about the human rights situation but failed to effectively press for an end to abuses or for punishment of the guilty. Even the slaughter of hundreds drew little or at most short-lived criticism.

Lesson Two: React promptly and firmly to preparations for the mass slaughter of civilians.

Many Rwandans, diplomats in Rwanda, and United Nations officials knew that militia were being recruited and trained to kill, but even when an informant told U.N. peacekeepers that the militia were meant to attack Tutsi civilians, there was no effective intervention to halt militia activities. During the genocide, the militia mobilized and led the general population in killing Tutsi, often carrying out orders given them by soldiers and national policemen.

The distribution of arms to the civilian population was widely known and elicited no effective international reaction.

Lesson Three: Pay close attention to the media in situations of potential ethnic, religious, or racial conflict. In cases of impending genocide, be prepared to silence broadcasts that incite or provide directions for violence.

For three years before the genocide, newspapers like Kangura had identified Tutsi as enemies of the nation to be scorned and feared. A private radio station, supported by many influential government, military, and political figures, broadcast the same message with increasing virulence and effect in the nine months before the genocide was launched. The media went so far as to name individuals to be eliminated, including the prime minister.

A year before the genocide, leading Rwandans and international observers all deplored the media campaign against Tutsi and members of opposition parties. But no one intervened to actually stop the calls to hatred or to promote the broadcast of countervailing messages of tolerance.

Having had months to build a listening audience, the private radio station was well-placed to contribute to the killing campaign once it began. The radio station incited listeners to violence against Tutsi and others opposed to the genocide, and gave specific orders on how to carry out the killing, including identifying individuals to be attacked and specifying where they could be found.

Silencing the radio broadcasts would not only have ended this particularly effective form of incitement and the delivery of specific orders; it would also have shown that the international community rejected the legitimacy of the genocidal message and those who were delivering it. The United States considered jamming the broadcasts from an airplane, but found the cost about \$8,000 an hour too high.

Lesson Four: Be alert to the impact of negative models in nearby regions.

In late 1993 and early 1994, tens of thousands of Hutu and Tutsi were slain in neighboring Burundi, a country demographically similar to Rwanda. These killings, skillfully exploited by Rwandan propagandists, significantly increased tensions in Rwanda. Both the slaughter and the absence of international reaction to it encouraged the planners of genocide to proceed with the attempt to eliminate Tutsi in Rwanda. Propagandists on the radio frequently spoke of the Burundian example, enhancing the impact of this negative model on Rwandans.

Lesson Five: Obtain accurate information about what is happening on the ground.

In 1994, the governments most involved in Rwanda—France, Belgium, and the United States—had substantial information about the situation on the ground but they shared this information with only a few others. Non-permanent members of the Security Council—with the exception of Rwanda, itself a non-permanent member in 1994—depended for information on the U.N. Secretariat. From the field, the head of the U.N. peacekeeping force in Rwanda, General Romeo Dallaire, and the representative of the U.N. Secretary-General, Jacques-Roger Booh-Booh, sent very different descriptions of events to the Secretariat in New York.

In preparing briefings for the Security Council, the Secretariat favored Booh-Booh's interpretation, which gave no sense of the systematic and ethnically based nature of the killing. Relying initially on this information, the non-permanent members agreed to withdraw most of the peacekeepers. But when they later learned of the extent and genocidal nature of the slaughter from Human Rights Watch and others, they pushed the Security Council to send a second and stronger U.N. force to Rwanda. Their efforts produced results, although not in time to influence the course of the genocide.

Accurate, impartial, and analytical reporting of the Rwandan genocide could have helped build a public demand for more forceful government action in halting the slaughter. But press coverage was limited, superficial, and often sensationalistic. Journalists usually portrayed the killing as the result of ancient, tribal hatreds rather than as a state-directed attempt to exterminate the Tutsi. Major media outlets gave more attention the problems of sports stars O.J. Simpson and Tonya Harding than to the deliberate slaughter of more than half a million people.

Lesson Six: Identify and support opponents of the genocide.

At the beginning, a vast number of Rwandans opposed the genocide. When potential leaders of resistance, including military officers, appealed for foreign support in the first days of the killings, they were refused. The people of central and southern Rwanda nonetheless continued opposing the genocide for ten days to two weeks. Instead of supporting these resisters, the Security Council undermined them by reducing the already inadequate number of peacekeepers.

The organizers of the genocide then gained confidence and decided to push the killing campaign into the regions that had thus far remained relatively peaceful. They stepped up pressure on the resisters by sending in militia from other areas where the killing was well advanced, by mocking them on the radio, and by removing key local officials who opposed the killing. Faced with this overwhelming pressure and feeling abandoned by the international community, the resisters either went into hiding or became active participants in the genocide.

Lesson Seven: Call the genocide by its rightful name and vigorously condemn it. Commit to permanently opposing any government involved in genocide, including by refusing it assistance in the future.

Rwandan government officials, military officers, and political leaders who directed the genocide claimed to be legitimate authorities giving appropriate orders for the self-defense of the population. This pretext of legitimacy made it easier for them to persuade people to violate usual moral and legal prohibitions. By remaining silent during the first part of the genocide and by taking no effective action to stop the killing throughout the period, the international community appeared to acquiesce in these claims to legitimacy. The government exploited every apparent demonstration of international acceptance every time Rwandan government representatives were received abroad, the event was fully publicized on the radio.

Rwandan officials and political leaders understood how dependent their government was on international assistance: they knew that no government could operate for long without such support. Even ordinary Rwandans who lived out on the hills knew the importance of international aid since they or their families benefited from schools or clinics supported by partnerships with foreign communities.

States and other international actors must send clear condemnations of the genocidal government and announce that direct foreign assistance will forever be denied to such a government. Doing so in Rwanda would have called into question not just the legitimacy of the government but also its long-term viability. Rwandans might well have been less inclined to follow the directives of a government that had little chance of continuing to hold power.

Lesson Eight: Impose an arms embargo on the genocidal government.

Many killers used machetes or homemade weapons, but soldiers, national police, and thousands of

militia used firearms in launching attacks on churches, schools, hospitals and other sites where thousands of Tutsi had gathered. A first wave of assailants, relatively few in number, killed thousands of civilians by using small arms, grenades, and mortars. They left the survivors of such attacks terrorized and vulnerable to assault by a second wave of killers wielding machetes and homemade weapons. The U.N. Security Council established an arms embargo, but only late in the genocide. Had the embargo been imposed earlier, the killers would have had fewer arms at their disposal and would have been less effective in their attacks.

Lesson Nine: Press any government seeming to support the genocidal government to change its policy.

Some governments, particularly France and several African governments, continued to support the Rwandan government throughout the genocide. This limited the impact of condemnation by those other governments that did finally take a stand against the slaughter. As official documents show, some French officials were concerned that continuing support for Rwanda was damaging their own international standing, but other governments with potential influence on France, like the United States and the United Kingdom, failed to press the French effectively enough to produce a change in policy.

Lesson Ten: Be prepared to intervene with armed force.

The organizers of the Rwandan genocide were relatively few in number, but they controlled three elite military units. Backed by these forces, they were able to assert control first over other units of the army and national police and then over the administrative system.

When the crisis began, the U.N. peacekeepers had neither the mandate nor the numbers needed for effective action. Had their mandate been broadened to allow offensive action and had they received support from the elite French, Belgian, and Italian troops sent in to evacuate their own citizens, the combined forces could have blocked the effort of the genocidal organizers to extend their control to other parts of the armed forces and administration. Intervention later would have required a larger force and would have saved fewer lives, but intervention at any point would have limited the number of civilians killed.

French troops, sent some ten weeks after the start of the genocide, saved at least ten thousand lives. Although meant to serve political as well as humanitarian objectives they intended to support the faltering Rwandan army as well as to save lives they did end up protecting Tutsi at risk of imminent slaughter.

Genocides are complex phenomena, each with its own peculiar configuration and dynamics. These ten lessons will not provide the full answer to stopping the next genocide, but they do provide a starting point for those who are determined to act in defense of our common humanity.

Related Material

Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda (<http://hrw.org/reports/1999/rwanda/>)
Report

Remembering Rwanda: Africa in Conflict, Yesterday and Today (<http://hrw.org/campaigns/rwanda/>)
Campaign Document

International Justice in Rwanda (<http://hrw.org/doc/?t=justice&c=rwanda>)
Thematic Page

Human Rights in Rwanda (<http://hrw.org/doc?t=africa&c=rwanda>)
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From: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/03/29/rwanda8308.htm> (<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/03/29/rwanda8308.htm>)

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