

THEY LOOKED THE OTHER SIDE

May 2011



They looked the other side, now the world joins Rwanda

Seventeen years ago this month, Rwanda—every valley and at the foothills of her beautiful 1000 hills—was saturated with dismembered bodies, of Rwandans, killed by Rwandans—as the world looked on (or the other side?).

The 'peace-keepers' under the auspices of UNAMIR, abandoned Rwandans in the time of great need. The warnings sent to the UN by a one 'Jean Paul' about the caches of machetes and riffles meant for the massacres of the Tutsi fell on barren soils. The incessant calls from the head of UAMIR at the time, Romeo Dallaire, to be given more troops could not be heeded either.

The Clinton Administration inertness was even more spectacular and conspicuous. Trying to avoid the rise of moral pressure to stop the mass killing in Rwanda, the Clinton Administration instructed its spokesmen not to describe the deaths there as genocide, even though some senior officials believed that was exactly what was happening. American officials said that so stark a label could inflame public calls for action the Administration was unwilling to take. Rather than compare the massacre with, for example, the deaths under the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the State Department and the National Security Council drafted guidance instructing spokesmen to say merely that "acts of genocide may have occurred." This was a definite lack of candor on the American side. But then France, It trained, armed, gave dry rations, mounted road blocks and went to the battle-fields to participate in entrenching the genocidal regime. Even when the genocide was stopped by the RPF/A, the French continued to cooperate with the defeated FAR in the then Eastern Zaire, the UN called the runaway killers the victims and instead of giving some form of aid to the RPF/A that had just defeated the killers, it (aid) was instead channeled to Eastern DRC where they had camped.

Another character from France, Judge Jean-Louis Bruguière also entered into the equation of confusion by labeling liberators as killers. The then President Mobutu of Zaire, sent in his rag-tag, inexperienced and ill-trained force to fortify Habyarimana's forces, but were made to pull out saying; "this is not our war!"

The Western Powers had been dealing with the spectacularly corrupt Mobutu Sese Seko for more than thirty years and had made him the most powerful man in Africa. When ex-FAR and the defeated interahamwe sought to enter Zaire with their weapons, after their defeat in Rwanda, he welcomed them. Once there, he embraced them as allies.

So from the village-mates inside Rwanda, some filthy neighbours, the adamant West, the politically numbed OAU (current AU), the UN, were all looking on as humanity in Rwanda was smoldering to ashes. Officials at the UN—and in Washington, Brussels and other capitals where leaders studiously ignored the Rwandan genocide—have given all manner of explanations for their failure to act. Some have gone so far as to apologise. There remains, however, a deep puzzlement about how so much of the world was so eager to turn away from such a great tragedy that would have been prevented with only a modest application of force.

The opinions are as numerous as they are varying, ranging from lack of strategic interest, the Americans' Black Hawk in the Somalia Syndrome among others. Alice Musabende, a genocide survivor now living in Canada, writing in *Globe and Mail*, was more explicit. "I must confess that, for a brief moment, I felt a little jealous of the Libyan people. Shocking? I felt this intervention was unfair because it made all the other wars and genocides in Africa – and elsewhere where despots decide the fate of everyone – seem so, well, little. I hate to make this comparison, but it took only a few weeks and several emergency meetings at the United Nations for some of the world's most powerful countries to decide to deploy their might on the African continent, to save civilians. It took the world three months to even recognize that genocide was happening in Rwanda, never mind that military intervention seemed to be necessary."

But as President Paul Kagame noted during the 7th Annual National Prayer Breakfast in Nairobi 2009, "We learnt the hard way what other countries should never experience: When a country allows itself to fail, it has no friend." Indeed in 1994 who was Rwanda's friend? Today, because of that restored dignity, the most powerful men in the world; the richest, former Presidents and Prime Ministers, investment partners, scientists and pundits all do associate with Rwanda. Not because it all of a sudden 'grew' natural resources and minerals that were lacking in 1994! No. But because the most intricate and prized tenets of humanity—dignity—has been restored.

However, during the same occasion, President Kagame emphasized the importance of dignity, a prize that had been robbed of Rwandans. "Finally there is the issue of restoring dignity to Rwandan people, which I would emphasize, has been central to our work, by reversing the lost sense of stewardship by former leaders who instead of transforming society, set community against community.

We must mobilise our society so that together we become masters of our own destiny – based on resilience, hard work, trade, industry and the powers of science and modern technology as well as innovation. We continue to build and transform our economy – and with our East African sisters and brothers, we should spare no effort in realising our vision of a highly productive region that ensures greater prosperity for all our people."

The 17th commemoration however, has depicted the whole world in empathy with Rwanda. The US president was among the first to stand with Rwandans during the 17th commemoration. With a message through his Secretary of State, President Obama noted; "We pause today to reflect upon one of humanity's darkest hours and pay our respects to

the victims killed brutally and needlessly in the 100 -days of carnage in Rwanda in 1994," observing that in the past 17 years, Rwandans have worked to rebuild their lives and chart a new course for the country's future. In Canada, the Canadian Association of Rwandan Genocide Survivors –HUMURA, converged at Parliament Hill on April 7 to commemorate the 17-year anniversary of the brutal killings.

And Rwandans living in New York and New Jersey, USA, on 10th April, converged to discuss challenges faced by survivors of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsis, as part of activities to mark the 17th commemoration of the Genocide. The event was organised by Miracle Corners of the World (MCW), a non-profit organisation based in New York, and Yvette Rugasaguhunga, a survivor and founder of the Yvette Rugasaguhunga Survivors' Education Fund (YRSEF), in New York. The topics discussed included the trans-generational trauma, effect of the Genocide on education, effects of rape and torture on women and children as well as social justice in Rwanda.

Then the Rwandan students at the Oklahoma Christian University, USA, were also joined by fellow students in a 'Walk to Remember' in memory of victims of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

In India, at the commemoration event, over 30 High Commissioners and ambassadors of various African and other diplomatic missions in India attended.

In Japan, Tokyo, the 17th commemoration was preceded by a prayer for Genocide survivors and victims of the Tohoku Pacific Earthquake and Tsunami that hit Japan last month, in an event that was attended by hundreds of African diplomats.

The UN Secretary General in his Special Message also noted; "On this day of remembrance, let us pay special tribute to the people and government of Rwanda for the resilience and dignity they have shown in working towards national recovery and managing the trauma of this atrocious episode of history."

Even in France, in the French City of Cluny, on the weekend of 10th April, the first ever Genocide memorial site in the country, in memory of the victims of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi was unveiled. Rwanda's Ambassador to France, Jacques Kabale, officiated at the ceremony to unveil the plaque and plant a tree in memory of the victims.

The African Union also held a moment of silence Thursday 7th April to mark the 17th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda. A lone candle wrapped in purple ribbon burned in the center of the African Union plenary hall as diplomats and dignitaries stood in silence to honor the over one million who died in 100 days of carnage in Rwanda in 1994.

"The AU is the African organization, and the Genocide in Rwanda is not only a crime against Rwanda, it is a crime against humanity Africa comprised. So after the genocide, AU like U.N., decided to organize every year a ceremony to remember what happened in Rwanda in a way to take lesson and learn from the experience of Rwanda, to realize, never again," noted Rwanda's AU ambassador Joseph Nsengimana.

In fact the "Walk to Remember" across the world attracted thousands of people both Rwandans and non Rwandans. They were all emphasizing the usage of one voice, resounding, not the drums of war, but diligent marches of peace and 'Never Again' notions, as well as promoting truth and the ideals of dignity.