

Rwanda: obscuring the truth about the genocide

By Barrie Collins

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Far from being radical, the attacks on France for its role in the 1994 war are designed to whitewash Western intervention more broadly.

Last week, the Rwandan government published the findings of its commission of inquiry into the role France played in the Rwandan genocide of 1994. It found French diplomats, military leaders and politicians – including former president François Mitterrand – complicit in the genocide.

Considering that the current Rwandan leadership has vilified France ever since it launched its bid to seize power in Rwanda in October 1990, eventually winning power in July 1994, it is not surprising that it should now up the stakes against its long-time enemy. The new strongman of Rwanda, President Paul Kagame, is fortunate that he has unwavering support from the United States, Britain and Belgium, and a cheerleading media in these countries which can be counted upon to give his report into France's role in the genocide maximum impact.

But the truth is that France's major mistake was to find itself on the wrong side of the moral parable that has been imposed by Western observers on Rwanda's recent tragic history. A war that was complicated by considerable international intervention has become over-simplified into a morality tale of good versus evil, in which France has been branded as part of the 'evil side'. Such a simplification further obscures the truth about what happened in Rwanda in 1994, and whitewashes the role of Western intervention more broadly.

According to the moral parable of Rwanda, the good guys were the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which invaded Rwanda in 1990 because it had no other means of protecting the persecuted minority of ethnic Tutsis inside Rwanda and of making the then Hutu-led government accept the right of return of Rwandan Tutsis living abroad as refugees. The bad guys were in the Rwandan government and armed forces. When the international community had helped Rwandans achieve a negotiated settlement, the worst elements among the bad guys drew up a plan to secure Hutu domination once and for all by planning and then implementing genocide against Rwandan Tutsis.

By the time the good guys – the RPF – had fought them off, their evil mission had been largely completed. Hundreds of thousands of Rwandan Tutsis were dead. Genocide had occurred, and the Western world had simply looked on passively. The United States refused to label the war that took place as a genocide in order to resist the clamour for international intervention to save lives. France was the only force on the United Nations Security Council to respond by sending in French forces under Operation Turquoise. But France's real motivation was not to save lives, but to shore up its erstwhile allies: the bad guys. The French helped them escape Rwanda so that they would not have to answer for their crimes.

A moral analysis like this is compelling because it provides a clear pathway through a maze of complicating factors. For journalists, this moral signposting of the Rwandan genocide leads the way to great copy about the bravery of the heroes and the moral turpitude of the villains. For governments, it provides the crucial element of legitimacy that is the essential underpinning of their right to rule. The Rwandan regime under Paul Kagame depends on this version of events for its support and survival. And so do its principal sponsors, the United States and Great Britain.

As the force that relieved Rwanda from genocide, the RPF - whose leadership currently runs Rwanda - has exploited this version of events to remind Western governments that they failed to live up to the 'Never Again' principle that was the driving force behind the passing of the Genocide Convention at the United Nations in 1948. While they battled the *genocidaires* in 1994, the Western world simply looked on. Except France, that is. But as a supporter of the former, pre-RPF regime, France's motives for intervening were highly questionable.

It may be the most widely told story of Rwanda, but this version of events is deeply flawed. While the US may have been embarrassed by this account, appearing less than heroic during the months of Rwanda's greatest torment, it is far easier for it to live with this embarrassment than to be confronted with the facts of how it *did* intervene in this region of Africa in the early 1990s and since Kagame came to power.

The 'plane crash' debate

In fact, the three most influential Western players in Rwanda at this time – the US, France and Belgium – all intervened in ways that created the conditions that made mass slaughter inevitable. Contrary to the prevailing version of events, after its initial deployment of troops defending Rwandan leaders against the RPF's October War in 1990, by means of *Operation Noroit*, France recognised that the US and Uganda were behind the RPF and had no desire to become isolated as the sole defender of the Rwandan government. So it increasingly made its military support conditional upon the government's commitment to serious negotiations with the RPF. According to an informant from the French Ministry of Cooperation, France's decision to disengage was already evident in 1990: 'We did not want to remain alone...there were great powers behind the RPF. Uganda could send 30,000 to 40,000 soldiers.' (1)

The Kagame government's latest salvo against France, in the shape of its commission report fingering the French for their support for the genocide, is in fact part of an increasingly desperate search for political legitimacy. The weakest point of the

Rwandan moral parable is the question of what *caused* the re-eruption of the war in 1994 and the subsequent descent into mass slaughter. The start of the bloodiest stage of the war is far more complicated than the moral storytellers – who blame it on the then evil government's determination to secure Hutu domination – would have us believe.

It was an act of international terrorism that triggered the return to war. In early April 1994, an aeroplane carrying Hutu President Juvénal Habyarimana was blown out of the sky by a missile attack that had been planned for several months. Apologists for the RPF have tried hard to blame the attack upon hardline Hutu conspirators, but they have produced nothing of substance to back up this claim. Rather, there is an accumulating amount of evidence that the RPF was responsible for the missile attack – and it is this evidence that has put the current RPF government, led by Kagame, on the back foot. It is the government's defensiveness on this issue that lies at the heart of the current France-bashing.

The UN's own investigator, Michael Hourigan, first came across compelling evidence of the RPF's responsibility for assassinating President Habyarimana and the other unfortunate occupants of his plane. However, it appears that under pressure from Washington, the UN agreed to shut down its investigation into the missile attack. Another UN investigator, Robert Gersony, came across evidence of RPF atrocities and was also silenced; the UN even stated that his report 'did not exist'.

These inconvenient truths threatened to muddy the clear waters of moral certainty that the Rwandan parable provides. The Rwandan regime has lived behind the shield of international powers which have worked hard to keep the matter of the plane shooting off the agenda. For all of its 13 years of operation, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), whose brief is to establish the truth of what happened in 1994, has ruled that the matter of the President Habyarimana's assassination (which it chooses to refer to simply as a plane 'crash') is not within its remit. When one of the ICTR's chief prosecutors, Carla Del Ponte, expressed her desire to dust off the investigation into the allegations against the RPF, stating that 'if it is the RPF that shot down the plane, the history of genocide must be rewritten' (2), she was abruptly relieved of her position and moved to The Hague.

Del Ponte's successor at the ICTR, the Gambian Hassan Bubacar Jallow, subsequently confirmed that the shooting down of the aircraft is 'not a case that falls within our jurisdiction' (3). It is ironic that the ICTR's first chief prosecutor, Richard Goldstone, has expressed his view that the plane attack *does* fall within the remit of the court and ought to be investigated. 'It is clearly related to the genocide, by all accounts [it was] the trigger that started the genocide and it would have been very, very important from a justice point of view, from victims' point of view, to find out.' (4)

However, the ICTR's deputy prosecutor, Bernard Muna, felt cavalier enough about the issue to tell the ICTR's legal adviser, Kingsley Moghalu, that 'after all, there was a state of war, and Habyarimana could be considered a legitimate target' (5). This is an extraordinary statement from such a senior figure. The missile attack was, among other things, a deliberate violation of Article 1 of the Arusha Accords of 4 August 1993, which stated: 'The war between the Government of Rwanda and the Rwandan Patriotic Front is over.'

Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the secretary-general of the UN at the time of the Rwanda tragedy, is also emphatic about the cover-up of the investigation into the plane shooting: 'It is a very mysterious scandal. Four reports have been made on Rwanda: the French Parliament Report, the Belgian Senate Report, Kofi Annan's UN report, and the Organization of African Unity report. All four say absolutely nothing about the shooting down of the Rwandan president's plane. That just goes to show the power of the intelligence services that can force people to be quiet.' (6)

Building upon the evidence received by the UN investigator Michael Hourigan, the French judge Jean-Louis Bruguière conducted his own enquiry on behalf of the family of the French pilot who died in the missile attack, along with the presidents of both Rwandan and Burundi and senior government and military figures. Bruguière's report is thoroughgoing and detailed. I have interviewed one of the several RPF dissidents who briefed the judge: Aloys Ruyenzi. A former member of Kagame's guard, Ruyenzi states categorically that he was in the room when Kagame gave the order to shoot down the president's plane, and names all those who were present. The meeting was between 2pm and 3pm on 31 March 1994 (7). The Kagame government reacted in its customary fashion to these revelations about the shooting down of the plane: it launched a character assassination of all the Rwandan contributors to Bruguière's report, and condemned Bruguière for being, well, French.

Western complicity: what about the US?

Yet there is more than the legitimacy of the Rwandan government at stake in this latest retelling of the moral parable on Rwanda. The RPF would not have sustained its war without diplomatic support from Washington. The US intervened to legitimise the RPF's war, even though the justifications for it had by that time proven to be baseless. The first invasion in 1990 was timed, not to force a reluctant Rwandan government to allow refugees to return, but to disrupt arrangements already in place to accommodate returning refugees.

Rather than being a desertion from the Ugandan military (the RPF leadership were in top positions in the Ugandan state), the invasion of Rwanda in 1990 was a joint Ugandan-RPF venture. President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda was keen to have an ally in power south of the border. More importantly, he wanted to be rid of his Rwandan refugee 'problem'. The issues of land occupation by Rwandans, and suspicions about the leverage that Rwandans in top official positions enjoyed in the Ugandan government, had generated Museveni's first political crisis since he took power in 1986.

Behind Uganda was its closest international ally and sponsor, Washington. It was US intervention, in the person of secretary of state for African affairs Herman Cohen, which chose not to condemn the RPF's invasion and Uganda's support for it, but rather to support the military recovery of the RPF upon its initial defeat. Cohen coerced President Habyarimana not only to negotiate a ceasefire with the RPF, but to enter negotiations with it in order that a stake for the RPF in a new government be agreed.

By July 1992, Rwanda no longer had a single-party regime but a coalition government and a new democratic constitution. The constitution guaranteed freedom of political organisation and prohibited discrimination on any grounds, ethnic or otherwise.

Of course, it takes more than a constitution to bring about democracy, but it was a promising start and presented another

opportunity for the US to tell its Ugandan ally Museveni to pull the plug on the RPF or face the end of the privileged 'New African Leader' status that it had bestowed upon him. There was nothing to prevent the RPF from campaigning for support inside Rwanda alongside the other opposition parties. Nothing except the fact that the RPF was feared and loathed by the majority of Rwanda's population. And yet, Washington was happy for the RPF to intensify its war. In February 1993, the RPF violated the Arusha 'peace process' with its heaviest offensive to date. It is arguably the case that if there had not been French forces around the capital Kigali, the RPF may have succeeded in seizing power at that time. The offensive resulted in thousands of deaths and the displacement of nearly a million people, living in miserable conditions in makeshift camps. This offensive did more than anything else to generate hatred for the RPF and, tragically, for the local Tutsi population who were assumed to be in league with the overwhelmingly Tutsi RPF.

How human rights lobbyists boosted the RPF

The RPF had violated the negotiations process with another round of death and destruction. But thanks to coordinated human rights lobbying, the RPF returned to the negotiating table unapologetic about its own conduct and full of moral indignation at the evils of the Rwandan government. A suspiciously well-timed human rights report was published in 1993, accusing the Rwandan government of gross violations of human rights. Some of its authors even accused it of genocide. The government had been responsible for atrocities against civilians in response to the RPF's initial invasion, and had admitted to them. It objected to the report's bias: the investigators had made only a token effort to investigate allegations of atrocities committed by the RPF, spending only a few hours interviewing people in the presence of RPF soldiers.

Thanks in large measure to the impact of this report, the RPF was able to take the moral high ground and use the negotiations as a vehicle for translating its military gains into political gains. RPF intransigence and military strategy was facilitated in no small measure by the human rights crusade that was launched against the Habyarimana-led coalition government.

But France, too, played a vital role in prodding the Rwandan government to reach a political settlement with the RPF. According to the French writer Agnes Callamard, it was not just pressure from the US that was applied to get Habyarimana to sign the Arusha Accords in 1993 – 'it is doubtful if Habyarimana would have signed the peace accords, which gave heavy concessions to the RPF, without pressure and guarantees from the Elysée through François Mitterrand's personal emissaries, and possibly from representatives of the Military Mission of Cooperation, specifically Général Huchon, Colonel Cussac – the French military attaché and head of the French military Assistance Mission in Rwanda, and his assistant, Lieutenant Colonel Maurin.' (8)

Having secured a virtual coup in the 1993 negotiations – the RPF had won 50 per cent command of the envisaged unified army and enough seats in the proposed transitional government to block anything that was against its interests – the RPF had emerged as the strongest party. The problem it now faced was the scheduled elections where its unpopularity would have been exposed. Local elections in the demilitarised zone that was created in the wake of the February 1993 offensive pointed the way – the RPF was massively defeated at the hands of the former ruling party.

Faced with the prospect of being downsized to a small party by the Rwandan electorate, and with clear support from the US and Belgium, it would appear that the RPF's interests could only be further advanced with a return to the battlefield. With the promised departure of French forces from Kigali in December 1993, the military path to the capital was clear. What was needed by the RPF was a justification for resuming the war.

The Rwandan war re-erupts

The assassination of President Habyarimana by means of the missile attack upon his plane set off a round of killings of opposition political figures by elements of Habyarimana's Presidential Guard on one hand, and killings of members of the former ruling party by the RPF on the other. Massacres of Tutsi civilians by Hutu militia soon followed in Kigali, and then spread across the country. But, contrary to the conventional story, RPF forces were on the march long before any massacres occurred.

Peter Erlinder, the lead defence council for the ICTR, stated categorically in a letter to the Canadian prime minister in 2006 that the final offensive of the RPF was ordered by Kagame within minutes of learning of the successful missile attack, 'long before any retaliatory, civilian killings had occurred anywhere in Rwanda' (9).

Three years of mounting fear, insecurity and material deprivation (much of Rwanda was by this time in the grip of famine) came to a head. Rwanda's hastily (but constitutionally) appointed government of surviving ministers fled the capital. The army was pinned down in one losing encounter with the RPF after another. In these anarchic conditions, Rwanda's defenceless Tutsi population bore the brunt of murderous hatred generated by an ethnically polarising war.

The RPF won the war and took power in July 1994. Africa then witnessed the largest mass exodus in its history. Over two million Rwandans voted with their feet and moved to former Zaire and Tanzania. The United States, Britain and Belgium in particular rushed to recognise the new regime in Kigali.

Even greater numbers were still to die. The new Rwandan regime's invasion of various refugee camps and its forced repatriation of refugees, the massacre of internally displaced people in Kibeho in April 1995, and two invasions of what became the Democratic Republic of Congo by the ruling RPF – all of this has brought the death toll of civilians to a level that is the highest of any conflict since the Second World War. The number of ministers leaving the new government and later dying in mysterious circumstances continues to rise. Accountability on the part of the Rwandan regime for these violations is waived by its sponsors in Washington, London and Brussels. Whenever challenged on these matters, officials from these capitals will reply that this was the force that liberated Rwanda from genocide, and continued Western backing for it is necessary to ensure that the *genocidaires* never return to power.

The truth behind the moral parable

But facts are stubborn things. Bruguière's charges will not go away. The matter of the assassination of two heads of state is the Achilles heel of the Rwandan government. If the RPF's responsibility for the plane shooting as a planned move towards

reigniting the war in Rwanda is proven, what can be said about the diplomatic protection given to the RPF by the US and other Western powers? How can the leader of the 'war against terror' – America – explain its suppression of the facts about the assassination of two heads of state? What do we make of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda's brief to foster reconciliation by establishing the truth and ending a culture of impunity?

In *The Times* last week, Linda Melvern wrote about 'a large room in the French Embassy in Kigali filled floor to ceiling with shredded documents. This was probably the paper trail that might have revealed the depth of involvement between the Elysée Palace and the Hutu faction responsible for massacring hundreds of thousands of Tutsi and opposition Hutu' (10). Holding on to the moral parable of Rwanda and endorsing Kigali's invective against France may work for now. But facts – about the start of the war, the actions of the RPF, and the role of Western intervention more broadly in pushing Rwanda to the brink – are stubborn things...

Barrie Collins is a writer on African affairs and author of *Obedience in Rwanda: A Critical Question* published by Sheffield Hallam University Press in 1998.

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(1) 'French Policy in Rwanda', A Callamard included in *The Path of a Genocide: The Rwanda Crisis from Uganda to Zaire*, H Adelman and A Suhurke, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1999, p. 178, note 19

(2) Interview with Carla Del Ponte, *Aktuelt*, 17 April 2000. Cited in *Le drama rwandais : Les aveux accablants des chefs de la Mission des Nations Unies pour l'Assistance au Rwanda*, E Karemera, Editions Sources du Nil, 2006

(3) [Bush and Other War Criminals Meet in Rwanda: The Great "Rwanda Genocide" Coverup](#), P Erlinder, *Global Research*, 20 February 2008

(4) [April 6th 1994 Attack Fits ICTR Mandate – Goldstone](#), Hirondele News Agency, accessed 12 December 2006

(5) Rwanda's Genocide: The Politics of International Justice, K Moghalu, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005 p.52

(6) [Second Thoughts on the Hotel Rwanda](#), Philpot, R, *Race and History*, 26 February 2005

(7) 'Major General Paul Kagame behind the shooting down of late Habyarimana's plane: an eye witness testimony', 2nd Lt. Aloys Ruyenzi Press release, 18 January 2005 (Ruyenzi re-affirmed his statement to the author in an interview in Paris)

(8) 'French Policy in Rwanda', A Callamard included in *The Path of a Genocide: The Rwanda Crisis from Uganda to Zaire*, H Adelman and A Suhurke, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1999, p.163

(9) *Open letter to Prime Minister Harper: Regarding state visit of current President of Rwanda*, P Erlinder, 6 April 2006 (Copy passed on to author by Erlinder. Emphasis in the original)

(10) [The murky truth about France and genocide](#), L Melvern, *The Times*, 8 August 2008

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