

1.7 The response of the international community



▲ Ambassador Colin Keating of New Zealand, President of the UN Security Council early in 1994. To his right is the Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali

The United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR)

As the death toll mounted, the calls for international action became louder. Following the deaths of the Belgian peacekeepers, within days, instead of bolstering the mission as requested by Dallaire, the Belgian government turned tail and withdrew its troops. Emboldened by this, the interim government forces stepped up the killing.

Elections are held in the October session of the General Assembly for five non-permanent seats on the UN Security Council. By coincidence, a seat had been handed to the government of Rwanda in January 1994. This meant that as soon as Habyarimana was killed and the interim government took over, Rwanda's representative in New York was privy to all the council's discussions on what was being proposed regarding the situation in Rwanda. So they knew about the Belgians' planned withdrawal and how the United States, France and the UK were unwilling to increase the numbers for UNAMIR, or do anything about what was happening inside the country. On 16 April, civilian and military leaders among the Hutu-dominated government made the decision to extend the genocide; within two weeks, an estimated 100,000 people were killed.

In Kigali, General Dallaire and the UNAMIR appeared to be helpless. Dallaire had requested help, warned the UN Security Council of the prospect of genocide and specifically requested an increase in the numbers of peacekeeping forces. Instead, on 20 April, Belgium's peace keepers withdrew and urged other countries to do the same. The following day the council passed a resolution to reduce the UNAMIR to a token force of 270, and for the remaining peacekeepers to try and arrange a cease-fire between the RPF and the Hutu-dominated interim government. The fact that the UNAMIR continued to save lives is testament to the men who remained behind, and to the will of General Dallaire.

The part played by the UNAMIR

Dallaire sent in daily radio logs describing the situation in Rwanda, which was spiralling out of control. He recognized early on that what was happening was a genocide and later wrote, "*One would have to have been blind or illiterate not to know what was going on in Rwanda*" (Dallaire, 2004: 306). As peacekeepers were pulled out and foreign nationals abandoned Rwanda, the RPF forces and Rwandan government forces were lining up to fight for supremacy. By the end of April, the RPF were beginning to control eastern parts of Rwanda and the pace of killing increased. At that time, the term "genocide" had been used by Oxfam and mentioned in reports made to the UN. On 28 April, a spokesperson for the US State Department was asked whether what was happening in Rwanda constituted genocide. She replied, "*The use of the term 'genocide' has a very precise legal meaning, although it's not strictly a legal determination. There are other factors in there as well*" (Shelley, 1994).



Despite its restricted mandate, the UNAMIR sought to intervene between the Hutu killers and Tutsi civilians and also tried to mediate between the RPF and the Rwandan army. The UNAMIR's inability to play a more effective role in preventing the breakdown of law and order was partially a consequence of the part played by former Cameroonian Foreign Minister Jacques-Roger Booh-Booh. Appointed as Head of Mission by the Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali (a personal friend), in his reports Booh-Booh undoubtedly played down the significance of the Hutu genocide and consistently held a more conservative position in reporting to the Security Council than did the UN commander on the ground, General Dallaire. On 21 April 1994, the Security Council, at the request of the USA (which had no troops in Rwanda), voted to withdraw all but a remnant of the UNAMIR mission. Incredibly, the council took this vote and others in 1994 while the representative of the genocidal regime sat among them. There was no condemnation of the regime until just before the final victory by the RPF. Dallaire was in no doubt who was responsible for the abandonment of Rwanda at this time in the international forum. He blamed the three permanent members of the Security Council: the USA, France and the UK.

Reasons for inaction: the role of France, Belgium and the USA

There is no doubt that the UNAMIR was hampered from the beginning by the lack of support and divisions among some of the leading countries as to what action should be taken. The mandate of the UNAMIR was essentially a watered-down peacekeeping role; it was understaffed, poorly equipped, lacked sufficient funding and was met by stonewalling tactics by the big powers in New York. Days after the genocide began, the UN Security Council had voted to reduce the mission and, as Dallaire and the UNAMIR attempted to sort out what was happening and provide zones of safety for those being killed, the world watched while Rwanda burned.

They cannot tell us or tell me that they didn't know. They were told every day what was happening there. So then don't come back to me and tell me sorry, we didn't know. Oh no. Everybody knew, every day, every minute.

— Philippe Gaillard, head of the Red Cross in Rwanda throughout the genocide

Some of those on the ground in Rwanda, but not all, saw the war almost immediately as genocide, and not simply as a particularly violent civil war which had re-ignited between the Rwandan government and the rebel RPF. However, the outside world, some of whom did not want to commit troops, money or support, chose not to see it as genocide. Mark Doyle was one of the first BBC reporters in Rwanda, and for a short time the only foreign correspondent there. In an interview in 2003 he commented:

The sheer scale of the killing was just unbelievable. Even at the time, I think it would be fair [to say] that we didn't realize the scale of it. It wasn't for several weeks that I realized that this wasn't just a tribal war, one lot of people killing another lot of people and the others fighting back. It was a pretty one-sided operation. It was a very efficient genocide. [But] I didn't use the word "genocide" for several weeks, because I didn't have enough information to be able to say that. It's believed in the first couple of weeks – I remember reporting

100,000 people had been killed. Well, people don't get killed on that scale in an ordinary war, but there were two wars going on. There was a war between two pretty efficient armies, by African standards – the RPF and the government forces were both serious armies, relatively small, but serious and disciplined in their way. But there was another war going on at the same time, a parallel war, which was the genocide war involving the government army and the government militias, as we now know. But it wasn't clear for several weeks that there were these two parallel wars going on.

This partially explains the inaction of some of the major powers who could have stepped in to prevent such a massacre. In some cases, it was deliberate policy not to become involved. Later, when the UN called for an independent inquiry as to why it had not prevented the genocide, it returned a catalogue of failures. Effective intelligence on the ground was offered as a reason why the UN had failed to take action as well as a shortage of equipment. Overall though, it was a lack of political will among the member states. In this, there are some who surely bear more responsibility than others in the tragedy. Reinforcing his judgement, Dallaire blames the UN as a whole and commented:

Ultimately, led by the United States, France and the United Kingdom, this world body aided and abetted genocide in Rwanda. No amount of cash and aid will ever wash its hands clean of Rwandan blood

— Dallaire, 2003: 323

The role of Belgium

Belgium, as the former colonial ruler of Rwanda, had a close connection with the country. The part Belgium played in its former colony and the impact of its ethnic policies have already been indicated. What is now being discussed is the role Belgium played during the genocide itself. When the UNAMIR was formed in 1993 the Belgians contributed the largest contingent of Western troops to the mission. Belgium presented itself as a specialist on African affairs with considerable connections to the region over many years. However, it was the killing of 10 Belgian peacekeepers, the charges levelled at the Belgians for having been involved in the assassination of Habyramana followed by the rapid decision to withdraw its troops, which set in motion the killing spree. The informer, "Jean-Pierre", had revealed that the people behind the genocide were counting on the fact that Western nations would be unwilling to tolerate casualties and would pull out of the mission if their peacekeepers were killed.

An independent inquiry was set up in 1999 to examine the actions of the UN during the 1994 genocide. It was chaired by Ingvar Carlsson. During the inquiry, in a report to the UN Security Council, Dallaire described Belgium's withdrawal of its remaining troops as a "terrible blow to the mission." His assistant, Major Beardsley, stated in an interview:

I think they'd [the Hutu] watched the news media very carefully. They watched Somalia, and they knew that big Western countries did not have the will to go into black Africa and take casualties. They had watched what would happen, that they could get rid of us or thought they could get rid of us any time they wanted, just by inflicting casualties upon our contingent. So



I don't think they were intimidated by us at all. I think they knew us better than we knew ourselves. They definitely knew the strengths of the UN and the weaknesses of the UN better than we did ...

Belgium's attitude to the UN proved to be important in supporting the approach of France and the USA to advocate a policy of non-intervention in Rwanda. Following the death of their peacekeepers, Belgium and France sent soldiers to rescue their citizens in the days which followed. This rapid and successful mission demonstrated that they had the capacity to intervene, and possibly to have prevented, or at least mitigated, the genocide had they wished to do so. Essentially, the Belgian government panicked; public opinion at home was evenly split between withdrawal and remaining. Most of the Belgian soldiers wanted to stay in Rwanda to continue the mission and were humiliated by their government's decision to withdraw. In 1999 the Carlsson inquiry, concluded:

The manner in which the troops left, including attempts to pretend to the refugees that they were not in fact leaving, was disgraceful.

Colonel Luc Marchal, the commander of Belgium's UNAMIR contingent, later wrote:

Our political leaders should have known that in leaving UNAMIR, we would condemn thousands of men, women, and children to certain death ... It is not surprising that many of them ... threw down their blue berets in disgust upon their return to Belgium.

This was a moment of shame for Belgium but more importantly, it was to be a death sentence for untold numbers of Tutsi.

The role that Belgium played in Rwanda had been a highly significant one. Some historians, such as Gérard Prunier, see the country as bearing considerable responsibility as the former colonial power, for the promotion of the Tutsi over the Hutu. This had been done in order to facilitate greater control over Rwanda. Belgium was the best informed and probably the most eligible to speak on Rwanda, and its decision to withdraw from the country was critical.

The role of France

The roles played by both France and the USA have, arguably, aroused the most controversy; the latter for what it could and perhaps should have done, and the former, for the part it played prior to the genocide, during it, and its efforts to bring it to a conclusion. From 1990 to December 1993, France openly supported the regime of Juvénal Habyarimana against the RPF. France encouraged the talks leading to the Arusha Accords while at the same time training the Rwandan army and the Interahamwe militia. Even as French soldiers left Rwanda, there still remained operatives working undercover and helping the Habyarimana regime train members of the presidential guard. Their sending of 600 elite French troops in October 1990 when the RPF invasion began, saved Kigali from possible attack. They were present in Kigali in and near the airport when the president's plane was shot down. Then in the last weeks of the genocide in late June, French soldiers were deployed on the border with Rwanda and Zaire to set up a safe zone

François Mitterrand, 1916–96

President of France throughout the period of the Rwandan civil war and genocide. Mitterrand was a socialist, steeped in the tradition of the left in France. He fought in the Second World War and gained the presidency in 1981. He became the only president to win a second term through popular vote in 1988. His African policies were devised in secret, with virtually no accountability to parliament in France. Many of these policies – including actions in Rwanda – were made in the confines of a special office in the President's Elysée Palace known as the Africa Unit.