

The Shameful Western Response to the Rwandan Genocide

On July 24, 1994, American troops landed in four East African cities, tasked primarily with coordinating the restocking of five massive refugee camps in Goma, Zaire, containing roughly 850,000 people. Operation Support Hope had begun.

Tribal infighting in Rwanda had caused what president Bill Clinton called the “world's worst humanitarian crisis in a generation.” The sudden outburst of conflict had caught the world by surprise, and there was simply no time for a response to be coordinated. In the roughly 100 days that the Rwandan Civil War lasted, over 800,000 of Rwanda's roughly 7 million people had died in a horrible genocide, and another 2 million had fled the country. Now though, the international community was mobilizing “one of the largest humanitarian relief efforts ever mounted” [1] to address the refugee crisis. Reports of bloody genocide and images of the squalid conditions of the cholera-infested refugee camps surrounding Rwanda flooded Western media. Thankfully, the West was there to save the day now: as soon as Operation Support Hope began, the death rates within the resupplied camps dropped dramatically: the mission was a huge success.

The international community's response was an incredible success, except for a few things. The international community *had* known about the War, and elected to do nothing. The Clinton administration did not want to be associated with supporting peacekeeping missions, which were unpopular due to the perceived failure of UN peacekeeping in the Balkans. And the “refugees” in Goma that the US was now supplying were not the victims of the genocide. They were the perpetrators.

When the Belgians inherited Rwanda from 1919, the country had no obvious ethnicities, only a class system. But influenced by ideas of social darwinism, Europeans felt the necessity to explain this social hierarchy by establishing a racial one. They classified anyone owning more than ten cows as a *Tutsi*, roughly 20% of the population, and the remainder as Hutu. They proceeded to extend the Hamitic hypothesis, which concluded that all the “superior” among the races of Africa descended from the biblical figure Ham, who was cursed by Noah to be a “servant to his brethren,” to the Tutsi. Essentially, the Belgians concluded that the Tutsi were so far superior to the Hutu that they could not be actual Africans. In reality, the two groups, if they could be considered as such, were genetically and culturally similar and lived in harmony. Nevertheless, this belief about the Tutsi informed the Belgians' treatment of Rwanda almost entirely. They handed out identity cards classifying each Rwandan as either a Hutu or Tutsi, and then enforced a strict caste system. The Belgian administration established separate schools for the Tutsi and Hutu, among other unfair behaviors, and generally empowered and encouraged the Tutsi to rule brutally. While this helped the Belgians maintain control of the country, it unsurprisingly bred hatred among the Hutu. As the nation gained independence in 1959, a bloody revolution resulted in the Hutu majority overthrowing the Tutsi elite and causing a significant portion of the Tutsi population to flee.

These Tutsi refugees, housed primarily in neighboring Uganda, began to organize almost immediately with the aim of returning to Rwanda. In 1979, this diaspora formed the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which advocated a return to Rwanda and peaceful reconciliation with the Hutu, formed in Uganda. When diplomatic attempts to gain acceptance into the country failed, the RPF launched an invasion. Despite only having 20,000 members and France intervening on the side of the Hutu-dominated Rwandan government, the RPF continued to have success, fighting a highly disciplined guerilla war. The government, recognizing its precarious position, responded with aggressive anti-Tutsi propaganda. RTLF, a radio station run by Hutu extremists with close ties to the Rwandan government, broadcast messages referring to Tutsi as “cockroaches.” These messages were extremely effective in radicalizing Rwanda's largely illiterate Hutu population against the Tutsi. When President of Rwanda Juvenal Habyarimana was killed on April 6, 1994, debatably by Hutu extremists or the Tutsi RPF, the RTLF's rhetoric turned far more violent.

They now advocated genocide.

The government and the RTLM alike advocated the forming of militias known as *interahamwe*, meaning “those who attack together.” Armed with machetes and handheld transistor radios, and supported by the majority of the Rwandan population, the militias roamed the countryside, killing anyone known to have a Tutsi identity card. In less than 100 days, the RPF took control of Kigali, Rwanda’s capital, ending the genocide. By then, 800,000 had been killed. 80% of the Tutsi were dead.

The RPF was well-known to advocate peaceful reconciliation, and did not engage in significant retaliatory attacks against Hutu civilians. Nevertheless, partially influenced by radical propaganda that claimed all Tutsi were killers, and partially because most Hutu knew they were implicated in the genocide and feared being held accountable, nearly 35% of the Hutu population fled Rwanda within a few days of the RPF taking control of the capital, bringing their RTLM-equipped radios and machetes with them. These were the refugees who fled to Goma, at least 60,000 of whom were estimated to be soldiers. The camps soon fell under the control of the leaders of the genocidal militias, who still enjoyed wide support.

These were the *refugees* the United States of America was supplying. The camp leaders soon put the aid provisions to use, preparing a re-invasion of Rwanda that would almost certainly have revived the genocide if successful. Instead, the Rwandan government launched a preemptive strike, which led to the First Congo War, which killed a further 250,000 and rendered another 200,000 *missing*.

The proper course for the United States was perhaps unclear; perhaps the U.S could have worked with the RPF to advocate reconciliation, while attempting to take the Goma camps out of the control of the *genocidaires*. What is clear though is that the international response to the Rwandan genocide serves as a perfect example of the results and catastrophic effects of Western ignorance of the outside world. The West refused to accept that there could be a government-sponsored genocide in Rwanda, preferring to dismiss it as a minor flare-up of a surely perpetual ethnic conflict among savages. And it did not care to look too closely at the consequences of sending aid, or even who, precisely, the aid was going to: a headline in *The Independent* read “. . .1 million Hutus flee advancing rebels.” The West saw only the interchangeable faces of starving African children, and saw aid as the only solution.

The Rwandan genocide occurred just 27 years ago. We must ask ourselves: would we act any differently today? And if the answer seems awfully likely to be no, we must decide to be much more thorough in the way we evaluate world conflicts. We must not resort to abstraction.