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Rwanda: Never again means never again

On the 20th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, the international community must continue its efforts to improve its response to mass atrocities.

Between April and July 1994, around 800,000 Rwandan Tutsi and Hutu opposed to the government were killed in a major human catastrophe of the 20th century. Many others were tortured, including women and girls subjected to rape and other forms of sexual abuse.

The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), predominantly formed of Tutsi, launched a war from Uganda in 1990 posing a military and political challenge to the then government. Tutsi had themselves fled to Uganda to escape previous waves of violence and repression in Rwanda. As the war started, the authorities called on its supporters to help government forces fight the enemy: anyone identified as a supporter or potential supporter of the RPF. This became a deliberate strategy to kill Tutsi by the then government who manipulated the question of ethnicity in order to maintain power.

On 6 April 1994, a plane carrying the Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana, and the Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira, was shot down over Rwanda's capital, Kigali, triggering ethnic killings on an unprecedented scale. National radio, including *Radio Rwanda* and *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines*, helped communicate messages of ethnic hatred and incited Hutu to kill. Official plans conceived by government to eliminate Tutsi, and Hutu opposed to the authorities, were carried out with unquestioning and brutal efficiency. The government provided training and distributed arms including machetes to its supporters from the former ruling party, the National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development (MRND), its youth wing, the *interahamwe* ('those who attack together'), its ally, the Coalition for the Defence of the Republic (CDR) and its youth wing.

As the horror of the genocide unfolded, the international community failed to intervene by preventing the killings, despite warnings. Calls for help from the ground were not heeded. On 21 April 1994, the United Nations Security Council voted a resolution to reduce the UN mission from around 2,500 to 270 military personnel, despite reports from inside and outside Rwanda of what was happening. A persistent lack of political will from member states led to inaction in the face of widespread and clear atrocities. A powerless UN mission stood by as tens of thousands of Rwandans were killed as each week passed. The RPF defeated the government forces and ended the genocide in July 1994.

Twenty years on, many perpetrators of the genocide have been tried and convicted before Rwandan national courts and *gacaca* community courts, by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), and courts in Europe and North America. Investigations continue into scores of genocide suspects living outside of Rwanda. Mass human rights abuses were also committed by the RPF in the immediate aftermath of the genocide and in the conflict that followed. Killings by the RPF remain largely unprosecuted.

The international community has itself acknowledged its failure to act decisively to prevent or stop the genocide. The remembrance of the victims of the genocide and those who survived should serve as a reminder to the international community, including governments of the region and the African Union (AU), that abuses must be prevented and stopped, wherever they take place.

The AU and the UN must note that the urgency of the deteriorating situations in the Central African Republic (CAR) and South Sudan demands strong peacekeeping operations in both countries.

International peacekeepers including the African-led International Support Mission to the Central African Republic (MISCA) and French forces (Operation Sangaris) have failed to effectively prevent ethnic cleansing of Muslims in the western part of the Central African Republic and in the capital, Bangui. In February 2014, Amnesty International criticized the international community's tepid response to the crisis, noting that international peacekeeping troops had been reluctant to challenge anti-balaka militias, and were slow to protect the threatened Muslim minority. Armed members of Muslim communities, acting independently or alongside Séléka forces, have also carried out brutal and large scale sectarian attacks on Christian civilians.

In South Sudan, thousands of people have been killed, many of them civilians, and over one million people have had to flee their homes after conflict broke out in December 2013. In response to the violence, the UN Security Council unanimously agreed to increase the peacekeeping force levels of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) so that it could better carry out its mandate to protect civilians. However, deployment of these forces has been slow. Meanwhile, despite a cessation of hostilities agreement signed on 23 January 2014 by the Government of South Sudan and the opposition, rampant attacks on men, women and children have continued across the country in blatant disregard of any commitment to protect South Sudan's civilians.

Lessons from Rwanda have still not been learnt, nor acted upon. As the world remembers Rwanda's victims, today must also be an opportunity for key members of the international community to stop and think: where civilians are not protected, an immediate and effective response is needed. Never again means never again.