

The Rwanda Forum

The Rwanda Forum, Saturday 27th March 2004

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Good afternoon everybody. Since I was already introduced, I will just tell you about the past. How we felt then in UNAMIR and how the mission could not keep focus on humanitarian assistance.

I arrived to Rwanda in 1993 and I must say that very soon I lost my belief in Arusha Accords. It seems that we were sent on 'Mission Impossible' and the international community was playing for time, waiting for some 'final solution' to the Rwandan problem. In 1994, the tension in Kigali and the hatred built up by the extremists were tremendous. It felt as though we were sitting on a barrel of gunpowder, waiting for a spark. I even said then that the genocide hanged in the air.

The spark came on the 6th April when the presidential plane got shot down. I spent the next days conducting frantic rescue missions of the ex-pats. At the same time I learnt about Tutsi killing spreading like a bushfire and I saw large scale massacres like at the Gikondo Church. Suddenly, all pieces of the puzzle fell into place: we had a well-organised genocide rolling through the country.

The UNAMIR mission was in turmoil. After the killing of the Belgian soldiers, the Security Council called for a total withdrawal - it was a very strong call. I have to salute General Dallaire again for his strong stance which allowed us to stay, and General Anyidoho for keeping his troops with us. Still, the withdrawal of Belgian troops then felt like a betrayal caused by the political reasons and these words, the political reasons, are repeated throughout the story.

I discussed that situation with the other Polish observer, Major Mark Bajic, who said "Arusha Accords are dead. All we can do is to convert the mission into a humanitarian assistance mission." General Dallaire agreed with that idea. By the 15th April we had a plan of humanitarian assistance for Rwanda. It called for creation of secure zones, co-ordination of relief agencies and protection of the population. None of those points was ever realised. That happened because of the pressure from the UN Security Council, or rather from Paris, London, Washington, Brussels. Instead of saving people, we were engaged into talks on impossible ceasefire. Basically it sounded to us like: "do not save people, play for time and see how it develops." We were explicitly forbidden to use the word genocide in our correspondence to New York.

Because of the political liaisons, we did not save anybody except for the people from the Hotel des Mille Collines. As a humanitarian assistance officer, I had a 'Schindler's List' of the people we were allowed to save. The conditions were: they did need a visa guarantee and a financial guarantee that they would be received outside Rwanda. Those guarantees were faxed to me and I had a tremendous file for every person which we saved. A few blocks away from the Mille Collines, there was a church, St. Famille, with more than 5000 refugees. Every night militia was killing people there. We did nothing for them and I guess it was because they didn't have visas.

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In May I tried to revive the humanitarian assistance plan. General Dallaire discussed that with me and we concluded that it was the right thing to do but we could not save people because of political liaisons. At that time, the sense of rebellion was very strong in UNAMIR. The words "nonsense operation" were commonly used by military observers to describe the refugee transfers we did. The Ghanaian troops even refused to drive the trucks on certain occasions. At certain moments I was considering leaving UNAMIR and joining the RPF in protest. I was going to go to the liaison officer saying "give me a Kalashnikov, I'm joining RPF." But I had still my 'Schindler's List' of people we were supposed to save and actually we did, so that balanced the situation that I did not join RPF then.

That nonsense came strongest in words of a Senegalese observer, Captain #####. He had a premonition of death. In May we were standing in front of Mille Collines and he said to me, "one of us must get killed to stop this nonsense operation." Ten minutes later he got killed. We put his body into a UN truck and dispatched him to Nairobi. We stopped the operation for a few days, and then we resumed. As soldiers in the field we were betrayed by our commanders, in New York, or again, the UN. Actually we used the words "paper screen" for the powers who were hiding behind the Security Council, because the UN is just the sum of its parts. It does not exist by itself.

We did our best. Six of us got killed during the operation and many wounded. We really wanted to help. Somebody said we all deserved a bravery cross and indeed I got one from the president of Poland, Lech Walesa. I dedicated this cross to all volunteers who stayed with UNAMIR and especially to General Dallaire, whose courage and leadership kept us running against the will of the international community.

Now I want to tell you how we perceived then the actions of the outside world. We were shocked by the abandonment. We were shocked by the tribal war reports. I remember that the main story in the UK was about a dog rescued from Rwanda. It was a photo, I saw later, with a dog rescued from Rwanda, with the caption "a foreign war veteran." Journalists - obviously - their brains were on holiday in those days, because anybody who read the history of Rwanda would figure out it was much more than a tribal war.

I can tell you some anecdotes which illustrate the approach of the outside world to the genocide. In June, when it was practically over, a Swiss representative asked us for assistance in evacuation of 22 nuns who were nurses. And we'd been asking him, what is the reason for that? The war is over, they are nurses, they could be useful in Rwanda. And until we had a couple of beers he did not admit, but finally he said, "you know, they are nurses, they work very well, and they are cheap." On the other occasion, about July, suddenly we received a lot of assistance, again when it was over. We got Australian troops coming to help us, we got Canadian troops coming to help us and we got British troops coming to help us. And as it happened again over a beer, I had a conversation with a British colonel. And I asked him, "sir, I heard it was a war between you and the French," and he said, "yes, and we have won." So on a lighter note, if you go tonight to the pub, be careful because beer seems to be a kind of truth serum.

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I see humanity living still by the law of the jungle, translated into political reasons. Who calls nowadays for peace? Who calls for sustainable development? Who calls for the Brotherhood of Man? It seems that we are great pretenders. Everybody pretends. The politicians pretend they don't know. The media pretend that they provide us with the truth and the public believes, or pretends to believe, that this is what they get. It seems that the governments and the public have a totalitarian approach to problems outside their own doorstep. We see people suffering far away as a mass, not as individuals. We can hear numbers: a million people got killed; eight hundred thousand got killed. What two hundred thousand makes a difference? This is wrong, we are individuals and we have to treat each other as individuals. That is why a few years ago me and my friends established Amahoro foundation in Holland. In a simple way we help children in Rwanda. We connect people of goodwill. Actually we are implementing agents, we activate people to do good things, because only the new generation of children when they grow up, I believe they can change something. Maybe a hundred years, as General Dallaire said, maybe two hundred, three hundred, maybe we get there. But we do have to start now. And sustainable development is actually the best way of genocide prevention. Look at Europe. Since we developed, we don't fight.

I congratulate Never Again and the Imperial War Museum and the researchers who came with very sharp conclusions today for this effort. Events like this are very important to convert the magic "political reasons" to some kind of humanity. And this kind of events may put political pressure on political reasons and get humanity out of the jungle zone.

Thank you.

