

# Legitimizing Inaction towards Genocide in Rwanda: A Matter of Misperception?

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An estimated 5-800,000 people were killed in Rwanda in 1994. The lack of international response was compelling and the Secretary-General of the United Nations blamed the international community for its inaction. However, the UN Secretariat *had* received advance information about plans for mass murder in Rwanda. Critics blamed the Secretariat for ineffectiveness and for having misread the situation while others emphasized the need for the strengthening of early warning capacity. This article presents a different conclusion, namely that the handling of the Rwanda crisis was a political decision taken by top Secretariat officials, rather than an intelligence failure or the result of bureaucratic inertia. The argument is, that the problem was the unwillingness of senior officials to use the information at hand to provide the necessary political leadership for an indecisive international community.

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## Introduction

Beginning in October 1993, the UN deployed 2,500 peacekeeping troops as the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) to oversee the implementation of the Arusha Peace Agreement, following four years of civil war. On 6 April 1994, following the killing of Rwandan President Habyarimana, Hutu militias, in cooperation with radical army personnel were directed to kill Tutsis and moderate Hutu members of the social and political elite. As a result, the civil war resumed. When the extremists massacred 10 Belgian soldiers, Belgium decided to withdraw its part of the UN force. As a consequence, on 21 April the UN Security Council decided to downscale UNAMIR to 270 troops. The massacres then went on virtually uninterrupted until at the end of June France launched a UN-approved intervention in Rwanda. By the end of the war on 17 July, an estimated 500,000–800,000 people had died.

This article analyses the role of the UN Secretariat in charge of UNAMIR. It asks: what was known, what was done and what were the consequences? The aim is to establish the rationale, if any, that lay behind the UN Secretariat's policy in dealing with Rwanda in 1994. The article begins with an analysis of the explicit and implicit claims of Secretariat officials as they have appeared in various public and confidential statements or interviews. It then analyses the information that the Secretariat received from its various sources, the most prominent being UNAMIR. The next part examines in detail the initiatives undertaken by the Secretariat in response to the developing situation in Rwanda in 1994. It next discusses whether the Secretariat's claims stand up in light of the evidence. Finally, the article seeks to establish the rationale behind the Secretariat's policy and its significance.

## The UN Secretariat's Claims

The claims expressed in interviews or statements made by Secretariat officials concerning the handling of the Rwandan Genocide in 1994 can be outlined briefly.<sup>1</sup>

### *Ambassadors of goodwill*

While countries and people in general had been indifferent to the suffering in Rwanda, the Secretariat had been relentlessly trying to coax member states into action. For instance, while the genocide was still ongoing then Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali stated, "More than 200.000 people have been killed, and the international community is still discussing what ought to be done. I have tried. I was in contact with different Heads of State, and I begged them to send troops."<sup>2</sup> There had thus been a considerable discrepancy in the attitude and efforts displayed towards the Rwandan Genocide by the international community in general and by the Secretariat in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> Transcripts of all interviews and statements are in the author's possession, two of which were kindly made available to the author by journalist Pierre-Olivier Richard.

<sup>2</sup> Boutros Boutros-Ghali, press conference, New York, 25 May 1994 (UN doc. SG/SM/5292).

### *A powerless scapegoat*

Interviewees agreed that the Secretary-General had failed since he was unable to get the troops necessary for an intervention. However, this was because he had been powerless, as stated by the current Secretary-General Kofi Annan, 'My predecessor, Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, pushed member states so hard to give the United Nations the capacity and the facility to do something in Rwanda, and we did not get it.'<sup>3</sup> Boutros-Ghali explained the lack of action in economic terms:

I believe that the explanation is the simplest one: there is a fatigue of the member states. They used to get involved in two or three operations. Now we have 17 operation[s]. The member states [...] are less ready to participate in these operations, because they cost a lot. Public opinion is not helping the various governments and member states to participate.<sup>4</sup>

This egoism is apparently a basic characteristic of human nature, which had a spillover effect that made states selfish. Since also politicians were egoistic, they respected the selfishness of their voters in order to preserve their own positions.

Accordingly, it was irrelevant to blame the Secretariat staff for possible mismanagement. First, they had done everything possible. Second, had they acted differently, it would have made no difference since there was no political will anyway. This argument was highlighted by a Department of Peace-Keeping Operations (DPKO) official who offered to play devil's advocate: 'Assume for a moment that all DPKO-officers be idiots; it would not have changed or saved any lives since the member states knew perfectly well what went on, and failed to act – even when the genocide went on and was in every living room of the world on the TV.'<sup>5</sup>

In this sense not only were people indifferent to the suffering of their fellow human beings, they indulged in *petit-bourgeois* scapegoating. 'But the worst is that one hides behind the banner of the UN and makes one carry the responsibilities of their rejection to act,' the DPKO official commented.<sup>6</sup> So although states were to blame for their lack of political will, because they were motivated by self-interest, the reality and virtually all-pervasive nature of this selfishness (members of the Secretariat excepted) meant that no-one was to blame.

### *Lack of information*

The issue of whether the DPKO had received substantial information during early 1994 on the Hutu extremists' plans for sabotaging the peace process and commit mass murder was a subject discussed in most interviews and statements. Most interviewees tended towards the view expressed by Sylvana Foá: 'No-one, no-one did enough to stop this, but it sure is a lot easier... to say what we should have done two-and-half almost three years ago with the knowledge we have today – than with the very, very scant information that we had then'.<sup>7</sup> According to these DPKO officials, the Secretariat had thus not had enough substantial information to address the Security Council in early 1994.

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<sup>3</sup> Annan, speech to Rwandan Parliament, 7 May 1998, pub. 6 May 1998 (UN doc. SG/SM/6552).

<sup>4</sup> Boutros-Ghali, press conference, New York, 25 May 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Confidential interview by the author and Gunnar Willum with high ranking DPKO official, 26 Aug. 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Confidential interview by Pierre-Oliver Richard with DPKO official, 14 Dec. 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Sylvana Foá, press briefing, 27 Nov. 1996.

## What Evidence is Available?

Access to information received by the Secretariat before and during the genocide comprises only a little of the most crucial correspondence between UNAMIR and the Secretariat that has been made public. This section of the article is based to a large extent, therefore, on other sources, namely: UNAMIR officers, Secretariat officials and UN documents. Although this does not present a complete picture, it still provides a fairly comprehensive understanding of the information received by the Secretariat. In this connection, the individual roles of Boutros-Ghali and the then Head of DPKO, Kofi Annan, have not been fully clarified and they have both been extremely cautious about giving details of their own particular involvement.

### *The pretext of genocide*

The existence of an extremist political movement desiring the subversion of the peace process in Rwanda had been well-known to outside observers of Rwanda, including the UN, for years before 1994.<sup>8</sup> According to then Chief of UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA), James Jonah, the Secretary-General had in early December 1993 received information from sources 'other than UNAMIR' that Rwandan President Habyarimana's associates were planning to subvert the peace process by assassinating moderate opposition politicians.<sup>9</sup>

After the deployment of UNAMIR in the autumn of 1993, the Belgian contingent realized the lack of intelligence-gathering facilities and undertook to quietly establish a small unit. as part of the Belgian UNAMIR force. This unit produced a number of internal UNAMIR reports whose content were obviously shared with the leadership of UNAMIR, Canadian Force Commander General Romeo Dallaire and his Belgian Deputy Commander, Colonel Luc Marchal. Besides this unit, the Force Commander had his own intelligence staff.

Throughout the autumn of 1993 and into the first months of 1994, a number of violent incidents took place, which formed a disturbing pattern. Any progress in implementing the Arusha Peace Agreement was countered by the instigation of violence. On one occasion in October 1993, the UN civilian police unit (CIVPOL), which was affiliated with UNAMIR, investigated an attack in the countryside, which showed that the Presidential Guard, well-known for its Hutu extremist sympathies, had been the perpetrators. Apparently, the work of the Belgian UNAMIR intelligence unit focused on the threats to the peace process posed by the extremists. For instance, by the end of December an intelligence report was filed, which described in detail a meeting on 22 December between the Rwandan Army and Gendarmerie leaders concerning the organization of weapons distribution to the militias. The report also concluded that the militias had been trained outside Kigali and were 'ready to go into action' when called upon.<sup>10</sup> Although the reports substantiated the well-known claims about militia activity and plans, Col. Luc Marchal, stressed that these

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<sup>8</sup> Interview by author and Gunnar Willum with UN Secretariat official (non-DPKO), New York, 4 Sept. 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Author's interview with James Jonah, Sept. 1996.

<sup>10</sup> UNAMIR intelligence report, 27 Dec. 1993, pub. in Belgian press and made available to the author.

reports were based on sources whose credibility was difficult to verify.<sup>11</sup> There was, however, no doubt that by New Years Eve 1994 UNAMIR had been effectively warned from a variety of sources that extremist forces, comprising both politicians, army elements and militia, desired to circumvent the peace process.

In early January 1994, UNAMIR received detailed information about a planned genocide in the first of a series of secret nightly meetings with a high-ranking militia leader. This informer told UNAMIR that he had been charged by top politicians from the Presidential party, the *Mouvement Républicain National pour le Développement* (MRND), to lead the well-known *Interahamwe* militia in Kigali and to prepare lists of all political opponents and Tutsis in general, who were to be eliminated at an opportune moment. He also noted that the extremists were worried that UNAMIR's presence could be a hindrance to the fulfillment of their plans. Therefore, plans had been drawn up to kill Belgian soldiers serving with UNAMIR in order to cause a withdrawal of UN troops. The informer disagreed with the plans for extermination of civilians and wanted UNAMIR to take action. He informed UNAMIR of weapons caches that he the MRND had ordered him to distribute to the *Interahamwe* cells under his control.<sup>12</sup>

Upon UNAMIR's request, the informer showed UNAMIR's intelligence a weapons cache at the MRND party headquarters. A natural concern for UNAMIR leadership was to acquire some sort of proof of the informer's position in the MRND. For this purpose the informer managed to deliver a video recording from a public meeting with the MRND, which confirmed his position in the party. After this, UNAMIR's intelligence carried out more visits to illegal weapons storage sites.<sup>13</sup> UNAMIR did not keep this information to itself. Within hours of the first meeting with the key *Interahamwe* leader, the information available at that time was sent by Gen. Dallaire to the DPKO. Later, when the informer's credibility had been confirmed, important details were shared with the DPKO through written correspondence and over the telephone.<sup>14</sup> This was acknowledged by a DPKO official who admitted that in the ensuing correspondence the informer's credibility had been confirmed.<sup>15</sup>

Subsequently, the informer reported that pressure had been put on him to speed up the weapons delivery. Also, subsequent UNAMIR reports to the DPKO made it clear that Habyarimana had not solved the problem with the extremists and the militias; on the contrary, the extremists had increased their efforts to distribute weapons. In subsequent faxes to the DPKO, the civilian head of UNAMIR, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Jacques-Roger Booh-Booh, summarized the situation after UNAMIR had confronted the President and other high-ranking MRND party officials (see below):

The initial feedback we have received indicates that both the president and officials of his political party were bewildered by the specificity of the information at our disposal. The President of MRND

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<sup>11</sup> Author's interview with Deputy Force Commander of UNAMIR, Col. Luc Marchal, Brussels, July 1996, and telephone interview, Oct. 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Author's telephone interview with UNAMIR intelligence officer, Oct. and Nov. 1996; Col. Marchal (n.11 above). Fax from UNAMIR to DPKO entitled 'Request for protection of Informer', 11 Jan. 1994, cited in Filip Reyntjens, *Rwanda, trois jours qui ont fait basculer l'histoire*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995.

<sup>13</sup> UNAMIR intelligence officer (n.12 above).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Confidential interview with DPKO official, 26 Aug. 1996.

seemed unnerved and is reported to have subsequently ordered and accelerated distribution of weapons... it may force them to decide on alternative ways to jeopardizing the Peace Process.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly the extremists had not given up their plans but intensified their efforts to arm the militias. In a subsequent communication the Special Representative wrote to New York:

[President Habyarimana] has not reported to us his findings nor any action he may have taken in this regard.... Each day of delay in authorizing [a] deterrent arms recovery operation will result in an ever deteriorating security situation and may if the arms continued to be distributed result in an inability to carry out its mandate in all aspects.<sup>17</sup>

The allegations were further substantiated during the following months by the parallel network of informers established by the Belgian intelligence unit. These internal UNAMIR intelligence reports detailed more secret meetings between MRND politicians, the *Interahamwe* and army officers who were planning to sabotage UNAMIR's work, as well as organizing and distributing weapons to the *Interahamwe*. A report, filed at the end of February, confirmed that *Interahamwe* had ordered their units to prepare lists of Tutsis in the Kigali prefectorate who were suspected of helping the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Also, *Interahamwe* units had been ordered to stay ready for action.<sup>18</sup>

According to a report dated 2 March, at this time *Interahamwe* units had been created all over the country except in the town Gitarama, which was well-known for its intellectual and non-extremist Hutu population. The report quoted an informant saying that a plan had been prepared at the MRND headquarters for the extermination of the Tutsis in case of a resumption of the war with the RPF. The report also noticed that the *Interahamwe* had caused serious concern to the Prime Minister, an opponent of Habyarimana and the extremists, who wanted to restore security in the country by disorganizing the *Interahamwe*.<sup>19</sup>

Besides UNAMIR, there was at least one other source of information for the Secretariat. The Belgian government, which because of its colonial history and contribution to UNAMIR, followed the situation more closely than other countries and stayed in touch with the Secretariat on a number of occasions. During January and February 1994, Belgian UN diplomats warned the DPKO that Hutu extremists were preparing massacres.<sup>20</sup> However, the Belgian diplomats realized that the Secretariat had knowledge from their own sources about 'the capabilities of the extremists', as one diplomat put it. According to the same source, on one occasion Belgian Foreign Minister Willy Claes sent instructions to New York, charging the Belgian UN

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<sup>16</sup> Cable from the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Jacques Roger Booh-Booh to Kofi Annan, 13 January 1994

<sup>17</sup> Alain Destexhe, 'Chronologie ONU/RWANDA/Janvier 1994', unpublished memorandum, 2 May 1995. Human Rights Watch identifies UNAMIR Force Commander Gen. R. Dallaire as the author of this piece. Allison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999, p.160

<sup>18</sup> UNAMIR intelligence report, 27 Feb. 1994, pub. in Belgian press and made available to the author.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 Mar. 1994.

<sup>20</sup> Confidential interview with diplomat, New York, 26 Aug. 1996.

mission to address the Secretariat (see below).<sup>21</sup> On 11 February Claes wrote Boutros-Ghali a letter warning him of the militias:

While information on the stockpiling of weapons by the various militias is becoming ever more compelling even some of the leaders [of the Rwandese army] admit that the prolongation of the current political deadlock could result in an irreversible explosion of violence.... It seems to me, however, that this higher profile of the United Nations on the political level should be accompanied by a firmer stance on the part of UNAMIR with respect to Security.<sup>22</sup>

Later, after having visited Rwanda in mid-February, Claes telephoned Boutros-Ghali to advocate his viewpoints once more.

Belgian concerns about the Hutu extremists' intentions and capabilities for sabotaging the peace process were thus expressed to several high levels in the Secretariat.

#### *Genocide and elimination of dissent*

In the context of the political violence in Rwanda as observed by the UNAMIR leadership, it was not hard to interpret the overall direction of events, once violence was instigated in the hours following the suspicious crash of the presidential aircraft on 6 April. Though UNAMIR's leadership did not immediately recognize that genocide was imminent, or exactly who was in charge, the political, planned, and systematic nature of killings was not hard to see. To quote Col. Marchal, 'To us it was just a continuation of the episodes we had seen earlier. Before it only lasted some hours or a day, then the militias withdrew; this time it did not stop'. From his quarters, Col. Marchal could see how militias from a nearby hill were going systematically from house to house dragging people out. A similar point was made by a UNAMIR intelligence officer who added that UNAMIR personnel were able to see with their own eyes how the militias slaughtered people at roadblocks.<sup>23</sup> The organized nature of the militia activities were also insinuated by Gen. Dallaire, who noted that whenever UNAMIR wanted to bring a convoy through roadblocks, he would establish contact with militia leaders who, if willing, were able to effectively withdraw forces.<sup>24</sup>

There appears to be no reason as to why UNAMIR leadership should have withheld such basic information on the general political situation in Rwanda from their superiors in the DPKO. Indeed, no UNAMIR officers or Secretariat officials have suggested anything of that kind. Also, a cable, sent as early as

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Willy Claes to Boutros Boutros-Ghali, 11 Feb. 1994, published in UN Department of Public Information, *The United Nations and Rwanda 1993-1996*, New York: UN, 1996, p.244. The letter is dated 14 Mar. 1994 by the UN, but research by a Belgian Inquiry Commission suggests the correct date to be 11 Feb. 1994. Des Forges (n. 17 above), p.161.

<sup>23</sup> Col. Marchal (n.11 above); UNAMIR intelligence officer (n.12 above).

<sup>24</sup> Author's telephone interview with Force Commander Dallaire, 26 Aug.1996.

8 April from UNAMIR to both Kofi Annan and the then Chief of DPA Marrack Goulding, clarified that 'a very well planned, organized, deliberate and conducted campaign of terror' was under way.<sup>25</sup>

## **Secretariat Diplomacy and Analysis of Public Statements**

We can now turn to an analysis of the Secretariat's responses to the developing situation in Rwanda, both prior to, and during, the genocide.

### *Silent diplomacy in Kigali*

The Secretariat, and in particular the DPKO, did not fail to respond to the information it had received from its various sources. A number of diplomatic efforts were initiated, going at least as far back as December 1993. Boutros-Ghali sent the Head of DPA, James Jonah, to warn Habyarimana that alleged political assassinations planned by the MRND 'were not acceptable' to the international community. On 7 December 1993, Jonah delivered the message in the presence of the surprised Gen. Dallaire. Habyarimana denied the allegations.<sup>26</sup>

At the beginning of January UNAMIR took action and confiscated some illegal militia weapons causing extremist MRND politicians to transfer others to new sites.<sup>27</sup> However, such initiatives was shortly afterwards prohibited by the DPKO when on 11 January Dallaire asked for permission to raid the arms caches pointed out by the informer. The request (a fax) was sent to the principal military adviser in the DPKO, Gen. Maurice Baril, but was answered in the negative within hours by Chief-of-Operations, Iqbal Riza, using Kofi Annan's letterhead.<sup>28</sup> The following day a meeting appears to have taken place among the 'usual trio', Annan, Baril and Riza, who 'used to get together to discuss things' concerning Rwanda.<sup>29</sup> Instructions were then sent to Kigali. First of all the rejection of the request to seize the weapons caches was upheld since it was argued that although the weapons were indeed in violation of the Arusha Peace Agreement it was not within the peacekeeping mandate of the UN forces to confiscate them.<sup>30</sup> Instead, UNAMIR was instructed that informal pressure was again to be put on Habyarimana to make him reign in his party colleagues' illegal activities. However, this time, UNAMIR was also to address the other leaders of the MRND separately and ask the Ambassadors of Belgium, France and the United States to address Habyarimana separately. Finally, the

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<sup>25</sup> Cable from the Special Representative, Booh-Booh, to Kofi Annan and Marrack Goulding, 8 April 1994, quoted in Howard Adelman and Astri Suhrke, 'Study 2. Early Warning and Conflict Management', p.42 in *Steering Committee of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, The international Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience*, Copenhagen: Steering Committee of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, 1996.

<sup>26</sup> James Jonah (n.9 above).

<sup>27</sup> UNAMIR intelligence report, 8 Jan. 1994, pub. in Belgian press and made available to the author.

<sup>28</sup> *Panorama*, interview with Iqbal Riza, BBC, 7 Dec. 1998.

<sup>29</sup> Author's interview with Jacques Castonguay (author of "*Le Casques Bleus au Rwanda*", Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), Montreal, Aug. 1996. See also Adelman and Suhrke (n.25 above), p.38.

<sup>30</sup> Marchal (n.11 above).

three embassies were asked to grant asylum to the informer.<sup>31</sup> UNAMIR acted accordingly. Also, Boutros-Ghali telephoned Habyarimana around this time, but it is not clear whether he was actually aware of the particular information about illegal activities.<sup>32</sup> However, as mentioned above, it was communicated to the DPKO that the desired results did not materialize. Also, the embassies declined to grant the informer asylum.<sup>33</sup>

A DPKO official later explained why the information had not been shared directly with, for instance, the Security Council or the international media. This was because of the 'context of what happened in Somalia and that none [in the Security Council had been] ready to envisage a chapter 7 operation.'<sup>34</sup> It had been considered unwise to confront the Security Council directly as this would imply a demand for action that was unlikely to be honoured: 'We did not feel [it appropriate] to directly address the Security Council.... We had to consider what the traffic could bear'.<sup>35</sup> Sylvana Foá also implied this point:

We went as far as we could. We went to three governments who had extensive intelligence capacities and told them we had heard this information, passed it on to them and told them we were going to the President of Rwanda.<sup>36</sup>

It was as far as one could go without crossing a line that was almost certainly expected to cause havoc with little or no expectation of actually getting anything out of it.

This line of reasoning seemed also to have been the background for the DPKO's refusal to convey Gen. Dallaire's requests for permission to raid the illegal weapons caches after he had their existence and locations verified. To cite the 'Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance in Rwanda':

As for Dallaire's request for reinforcements and a proactive mandate interpretation, the DPKO officials said such requests were not forwarded to the Security Council because the Council was expected to turn them down anyway.<sup>37</sup>

It could be argued that asking the French, Belgian and US Ambassadors for their support was not merely a polite appeal to put diplomatic pressure on Habyarimana. As Sylvana Foá implied, the three countries were chosen among others because they had 'extensive intelligence capacities'. The forwarding of information from the informer could thus be seen as a discrete encouragement for these countries to use their capacities to investigate the allegations and to take action in case they found it appropriate. Apparently they did not. They also refused to grant the informer asylum, which would have been an excellent way of retrieving more information. In this sense the message was clear: these countries were not interested in committing themselves.

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<sup>31</sup> United Nations (n.22 above), pp.31–2. Office of the Spokesman of the Secretary-General, *'Chronology of Events Relating to Rwanda'*, press release, New York, 11 Mar. 1996.

<sup>32</sup> Confidential interview (see n.6 above), 14 Dec. 1995.

<sup>33</sup> Destexhe (n.16 above).

<sup>34</sup> Confidential telephone interview by Pierre-Olivier Richard with DPKO official, 10 Nov. 1995.

<sup>35</sup> Confidential interview (n.5 above), 26 Aug. 1996.

<sup>36</sup> Foá (n.7 above).

<sup>37</sup> Adelman and Surhke (n.25 above), p.84.

Accordingly, DPKO refused to take further initiatives on its own accord. Even as Belgian diplomats addressed the Secretariat, on Claes' instructions, action on the part of the UN was declined. During a meeting, which apparently took place during January or February, Annan and his immediate subordinate, Iqbal Riza, instead asked the Belgian diplomats to go back to the Belgian government and ensure that 'these elements be tackled'.<sup>38</sup>

Reiterated requests by UNAMIR for arms recovery operations and reinforcements of both material and personnel were denied again. Instead, on 3 February, DPKO replied that UNAMIR could 'assist, on a case-by-case basis, in illegal arms recovery operations conducted by the Rwandese authorities'.<sup>39</sup> Not surprisingly, few weapons were seized in this way, although some operations were in fact planned.<sup>40</sup> In mid-February, UNAMIR issued a communiqué calling on the parties to refrain from arming their militias, although it remains unclear whether this initiative was supported by New York.<sup>41</sup>

There appears, however, to have been internal dissent from the DPKO's approach. As it became clear that initiatives to bring the situation in Rwanda under control were discontinued, a DPKO official started circulating copies of the most crucial written correspondence to Secretariat departments outside the DPKO, apparently aiming to make somebody react.<sup>42</sup> These efforts were in vain.

The cautious attitude by the DPKO seems to be appropriately reflected in the briefings and reports to the Security Council. Throughout the months of January, February and March 1994, there was no mention of militias, distribution of weapons to these militias, or plans for subverting the peace process, whether in closed or public sessions.<sup>43</sup>

### *A mythical interpretation of the killings*

The downing of the President's plane and the subsequent violence caught the Security Council by surprise. After the Belgian contingent had been withdrawn the United States started lobbying for a complete withdrawal – seconded by Belgium who did not want to be seen as the only one abandoning Rwanda. Several members of the Council opposed this and discussions continued for weeks. But what was the Secretariat's response to the escalating new situation? How did the Secretary-General describe the events in Rwanda and explain the killings, and what were his suggestions?<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Confidential interview by the author and Gunnar Willum with diplomat, New York, 23 Aug. 1996.

<sup>39</sup> Office of the Spokesman (n.31 above), p.2. Adelman and Surhke (n.26 above), p.38.

<sup>40</sup> Marchal (n.11 above).

<sup>41</sup> *Le Monde*, 19 Feb. 1994, quoted in Gerard Prunier, *The Rwandese Crisis 1959-1994*, London: Hurst, 1995, p.205.

<sup>42</sup> The item circulated was the fax dated 11 Jan. 1994 (n.12 above). Adelman and Surhke (n.25 above), p.9.

<sup>43</sup> Jonah (n.9 above). Press briefings by the Spokesman of the Secretary-General, Jan.-Apr. 1994. Author's telephone interviews with Czech Ambassador, Karel Kovanda, Oct. and Nov. 1996; with UK Ambassador, David Hannay, London, 18 Jan. 1999; with diplomats representing three different countries in the Security Council in 1994, New York, 23 Aug., 3 Sept., 4 Sept. 1996, and telephone interview Oct. 1996.

<sup>44</sup> In the period covering the outbreak of the crisis on 6 April and the Council's decision to authorize the French intervention on 22 June, I documented a total of 14 press releases, official letters to the Security Council, Security Council reports and personal statements by the Secretary-General on Rwanda. Of these 14, however, only 4 describe the reason for and nature of the killings in Rwanda; namely a report dated 20 April, a letter dated 29 April and two reports dated 13 May and 31 May. The remaining 10 statements were: Press releases on 7 April, 8 April and 12 April, a brief statement on 13 April, letter dated 3 May, TV-interview

It was not until a report was filed with the Council on 20 April that the Secretary-General explained publicly why killings took place in Rwanda. He stated: 'This tragic incident [the downing of the Presidents plane] set off a torrent of widespread killings, mainly in Kigali but also in other parts of the country. The violence appears to have both political and ethnic dimensions.'<sup>45</sup> This initial comment indicates that politics might, in part, be a motivating factor in the killings. However, in the following sentences there was no inkling of any politically-coordinated efforts behind the killings.

Reliable reports strongly indicate that the killings were started by unruly members of the Presidential Guard, then spread quickly throughout the city.... Authority collapsed, the provisional Government disintegrated and some of its members were killed in the violence. An interim Government was proclaimed on 8 April 1994, but could not establish authority.<sup>46</sup>

If one follows the Secretary-General's line of argument, then unruly members of the Presidential Guard started the killings. As they were unruly and thus did not take orders, they had started the killings on their own accord and apparently for no reason. Furthermore, these killings had then led to further violence, again apparently for no reason, which then led to a collapse in authority and disintegration of the government. Instead of attributing the killings to the government, the opposite assumption was made, that it was in the government's interest to stop the violence since the war was the very reason that the government could not establish its authority. Thus the violence was irrational as it started for no reason and caused new violence for no reason. There was thus a mythical interpretation of events inherent in the report, as basic premises and qualities within humans were stated or observed as self-evident characteristics, rather than explained, thereby giving them a logic apparently beyond question and human control.<sup>47</sup> Rwandans were subject to a historic fate determined not by their own will but by the inherent logic of natural forces which now and then dictated unmotivated racial fighting.

#### *A reversion of policy but not of myth*

For weeks the Secretary-General avoided engaging himself in the debate concerning UNAMIR's future and the international response to Rwanda. In the 20 April report, the Secretary-General had merely outlined three options and stated that he did not recommend a complete withdrawal. Upon the receipt of this report, the Council voted on 21 April to downscale UNAMIR to a token force. Only on 22 April did the Secretary-General suddenly, through his spokesman, state that he had wished that the Security Council had reinforced the troops in Rwanda with a change to a more progressive mandate.<sup>48</sup> This point was reiterated in a somewhat vaguer formulation in a formal letter to the Security Council on 29 April in which he urged the Council to consider 'what action, including forceful action, it could take, or could authorize Member States to

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on ABC on 4 May, press release on 5 May, press release on 13 May, press conference on 25 May, letter 19 June.

<sup>45</sup> SG report, 20 April 94 (UN doc. S/1994/470).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> On the definition of myth see Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1972, p.143

<sup>48</sup> Press briefing by the Spokesman of the Secretary-General, 22 April 1994.

take, in order to restore law and order and end the massacres.' But as a detailed analysis of this letter will reveal, the picture of meaningless killings was not reversed; in fact, it was reinforced. Although the second paragraph of the letter mentions 'strong evidence of preparations for further massacres of civilians who fear for their lives but enjoy little effective protection', which indicated some organized nature of events, this is not explored further. Instead, there was more meaningless violence. 'First, that incident [the plane crash] sparked a resumption of fighting between the Rwanda Government Forces (RGF) and the RPF. Secondly, it reawakened deep-rooted ethnic hatreds, which have plagued Rwanda in the past and which have again led to massacres of innocent civilians on a massive scale.'<sup>49</sup> Fighting between the armies started because of the plane crash – seemingly for no reason. Massacres started due to irrational hatred among people who had killed each other throughout history. Blame for the violence was located in the unexplained irrational ontological quality of the Rwandan people according to their race.

We will now consider what these implications mean for any discussion of foreign intervention. If people in Rwanda like to kill each other, it makes no sense to talk of saving them. Temporarily, a foreign intervention might succeed in halting the killings by separating the Hutus and the Tutsis. However, this would obviously expose the deployed forces to a great risk and – what is more important – the killings would start again as soon as the troops had left. An intervention would be in vain.

Meanwhile, diplomats in favour of an intervention had been working for a Presidential Statement, which was adopted on 30 April, condemning the killings in Rwanda using phrases drawn from the Genocide Convention. The US Government, on the other hand, had been at great pains not to refer to events in Rwanda as 'genocide', as government lawyers in an inter-agency meeting had stressed the legal obligation of taking action in cases where genocide was admitted to be taking place.

On 4 May, the Secretary-General gave his first interview since the commencement of the genocide. He stated, for the first time, that genocide was taking place in Rwanda, but refrained from explaining the reason behind the massacres. He then made his case for an intervention, '*Even if you [the Security Council?] will not intervene in the confrontation, at least we will be able to protect the refugees.*'<sup>50</sup> A ceasefire or a coerced halt to the fighting between the government army and the RPF was suggested as the best defensive option, but not, for instance, an intervention to stop the government-directed militias from killing unprotected people off the battlefield.

#### *Invalidating the claim for action*

In early May, as it became clear that there was consensus in the Council that something had to be done, US diplomats prolonged the process by discussing at length whether a possible intervention should take place from inside Rwanda or from the outside. Finally, however, the reinforcement of UNAMIR to 5,500 troops was decided upon on 15 May. But despite the DPKO contacting a number of countries, there continued to be no troop-contributions.

On the Secretary-General's next public appearance on 25 May, he asked for troops. However, the request was highly ambiguous, as he gave no description of the massacres, and any motivation or workable

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<sup>49</sup> Secretary-General's letter to the Security Council, 29 April 94 (UN doc. S/1994/518).

<sup>50</sup> My italics. Boutros-Ghali, interview on *Nightline*, ABC TV, 4 May 1994.

plan for intervention was also hard to find: 'It is not our intention to impose a certain formula on the two protagonists to the dispute. We need the agreement of the two protagonists, and then we will have to play the role of catalyst, of mediator.'<sup>51</sup> Suddenly, the international community was again being deprived of its responsibility to act. So far the problem was not located in a centrally-directed genocidal group, but in two groups hostile to and in conflict with one another. Further, the responsibility for any first step was located with both sides and certainly not with external parties. The Secretary-General asked for an intervention, but he also de-legitimized this request.

The blurring of the situation continued in a report of 31 May. The Secretary-General mentioned the systematic nature of killings by paraphrasing the earlier Security Council statement from 30 March to the extent that the massacres and killings had 'continued in a systematic way throughout the country, especially in the areas under the control of members or supporters of the armed forces of the Interim Government of Rwanda.' However, even though the Secretary-General again declared genocide, the picture was distorted because he simultaneously declared that it was to be investigated whether 'the violence that followed [the plane crash] was part of a planned pogrom'. While acknowledging that killings took place within the government-controlled zone, he also proclaimed that the government was to 'immediately take effective measures to halt such killings in the zone under their control.'<sup>52</sup> This created confusion as to whether or not the government was directly responsible for the killings, that is whether it was steering events or merely failing to prevent others from killing. In sum, the report did not alter the picture of hatred and anarchic violence of his previous public communications.

Throughout May and June, the Secretariat negotiated with potential troop-contributing countries, while in particular the United States continued its effort to obstruct the implementation of a reinforced UNAMIR. At the end of June, as French troops were finally deployed, the Secretary-General had still not identified the systematic killings, or the extremist Rwandan government as the perpetrator.

## **The UN Secretariat's Claims in Light of the Evidence**

### *Pushing for intervention or manipulation of history?*

The main claim of Secretariat officials has been that they had been pushing what they knew to be highly unwilling states into action in Rwanda. Is this claim justified?

In an official publication on UNAMIR (1996), Boutros-Ghali asserted that crucial information from the *Interahamwe* leader concerning plans for massacres and subversion had been passed on to the Security Council shortly after it had been received. He wrote, 'On the same day [12 January 1994] in New York, my Special Adviser briefed the Security Council on the reports, which had been received from UNAMIR and on the actions the United Nations had taken in response.'<sup>53</sup> However, in a confidential interview one of his own

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<sup>51</sup> Boutros-Ghali, press conference, New York, 25 May 1994.

<sup>52</sup> SG Report, 31 May 94 (UN doc. S/1994/640).

<sup>53</sup> United Nations (n.22 above), p.32.

staff rejected this claim.<sup>54</sup> Subsequently, Boutros-Ghali had to admit this in a private meeting with Czech Ambassador Karel Kovanda, who had chaired the Security Council in January 1994.<sup>55</sup>

The action taken by the Secretariat, when the crisis was in full swing, has also been the subject of controversies. Boutros-Ghali claimed that on receiving the news of Belgium's withdrawal of its UNAMIR contingent, he 'sent a letter to the Security Council saying that we must replace those troops by other troops.'<sup>56</sup> The Belgian government had decided on withdrawal on 12 April, and the letter from Boutros-Ghali in response was presented to the Council on 13 April. Subsequently, the letter has been published by the UN in the official publication on UNAMIR – and it quite clearly does not ask the Security Council to reinforce UNAMIR.<sup>57</sup>

The claim that the Secretary-General had promoted a reinforcement of UNAMIR in the period up to the Security Council decision on UNAMIR's future on 21 April was put forward on a number of occasions. Sylvana Foá, said in an interview, 'On the same day [20 April] it was announced publicly, he was giving them three options and he goes for the immediate massive reinforcement.'<sup>58</sup> This claim was also published in a press release as well as in the introduction written by Boutros-Ghali to the above-mentioned publication on UNAMIR.<sup>59</sup> However, such an appeal to the Council was not found on either 20 April or on 21 April in any press briefings or press releases from these days or in the official report to the Council. And it appears that such a recommendation was not forwarded in the Council's informal consultations either.<sup>60</sup> What happened was that the Secretary-General's spokesman on 22 April (the day after the Security Council had decided to reduce UNAMIR) stated that the Secretary-General had wished the Council would have reinforced the troops.<sup>61</sup>

This belated support for an intervention is however not the only fact contradicting the proposed moral leadership of the Secretary-General. While Secretariat officials have been extremely eager to stress how the Secretary-General announced the genocide in May of 1994, the organized nature of these killings is absent in the official statements and documents for the whole period. He thus willfully questioned the basis needed for the Security Council to intervene because a genocide is only a genocide if it is *organized with intent to destroy in whole or in part (i.e.) an ethnic group*. As a consequence of this, neither he nor any other Secretariat officials involved were ever able to come up with a workable plan for an intervention force or even clarified whether such a force was to intervene in the civil war or hinder militia in slaughtering civilians.

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<sup>54</sup> Confidential interview (n.5 above), 26 Aug. 1996.

<sup>55</sup> *Information* (Copenhagen) 5 Dec. 1996.

<sup>56</sup> Boutros-Ghali (see n.50 above), 4 May 1994.

<sup>57</sup> Unofficial letter from the Secretary-General to the President of the Security Council, published in *United Nations* (n.22 above), p.259.

<sup>58</sup> Confidential interview with Sylvana Foá, New York, 12 Sept. 1996.

<sup>59</sup> Office of the Spokesman (n.31 above); *United Nations* (n.22 above), p.43.

<sup>60</sup> Interviews with diplomats (n.43 above).

<sup>61</sup> Press briefing by the Spokesman of the Secretary-General, 22 April 1994.

### *The UN Secretariat – merely a powerless scapegoat?*

This article will not contradict the commonly held viewpoint that most foreign governments were unwilling to commit both themselves and the UN in Rwanda, and that the United States and United Kingdom tried to prevent the issue being discussed in the Security Council.<sup>62</sup> However, the assertion that it would have made no difference at all whatever the Secretariat and the Secretary-General had done, which is a very different claim, was false. Among the claims was Boutros-Ghali's insinuation that the main obstacle was financial because it was impossible to get public support for costly peacekeeping operations. A more explicit claim by Kofi Annan asserted that even when Boutros-Ghali had sought to embarrass member states into action by proclaiming genocide he had not been given the troops to do something.

Boutros-Ghali's claim that stinginess was the major obstacle (if not the only one) to an intervention is the easiest to dismiss. It is estimated that in the first two years following the genocide alone, the international community spent roughly US\$2.5 billion on the Rwandan refugees who fled to eastern Zaire in 1994 – while a peacekeeping mission would have cost considerably less (and saved most of the money spent on the refugees).<sup>63</sup>

As for the second claim: When Boutros-Ghali asked for troops, he actually got them. The fact that he got them late – far too late to save the majority of the victims and after many diplomatic obstructions in the Security Council, particularly by the United States, does not contradict the fact that he did get troops. On Boutros-Ghali's request, the Security Council authorized the French government to intervene, which actually saved an estimated 12–15,000 people. This fact was at odds with the Secretariat's claim that it would have made no difference whatever it had done since the world had done nothing. What is asserted here is not that member states were eager or willing to contribute troops, but merely the rather different claim that it had not been impossible to have troops sent to Rwanda, as Secretariat officials repeatedly asserted.

### *Lack of information?*

The evidence demonstrates that in the months prior to the outbreak of massacres in Rwanda, the Secretariat had knowledge of the existence of militias as well as of their being armed and organized for political purposes to sabotage and organize against the democratization process. There was also evidence of small-scale massacres on the civilian population as well as plans for physical elimination of political dissent and for extensive massacres on the Tutsi population. Although one can argue that the DPKO before 6 April did not know a genocide was about to take place, to dismiss all the above as argument with the benefit of hindsight is at odds with facts. It is simply not possible to claim, as a surprising number of people have done, that the DPKO should have overlooked the correspondence from UNAMIR on, for instance, the *Interahamwe* informer. On the contrary, the Secretariat's concern and prompt response on several occasions to bring the extremists under control bear witness to the contrary.

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<sup>62</sup> *Panorama* (n.28 above), which includes interviews with the Czech ambassador whose ministry in Prague was warned off raising the issue.

## Conclusion

This article has argued against most of the existing literature concerning Rwanda and the UN, namely on the point that the Secretariat's management of Rwanda amounted to a mishandling based upon a *misunderstanding* of the Rwandan situation. A few quotes from a major study on the international response to the Rwanda Genocide, the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, demonstrates this point:

When the Secretary-General on 20 April formally presented the Security Council with options of how to respond, he *failed to recognize* the organized and systematic nature of the violence.... Instead, Boutros-Ghali saw anarchy and spontaneous slaughter.<sup>64</sup>

It is untenable to claim that the situation was misconstrued or that crucial information from UNAMIR was overlooked in the DPKO and most certainly not after the killings had started. After having known for months how militias had been organized and armed by extremist politicians within the government, and even receiving first-hand information on the planning and blacklisting of people, it is simply implausible to assert that the Secretariat throughout the genocide did not know that these killings were systematic attempts to destroy political opposition and undesired citizens in general. Rather, its handling amounted to a deliberate decision not to go to the Security Council or to the public with this information. This includes data received before the genocide, but it concerns in particular the knowledge that was available during the genocide.

The question of the proclaimed good intention of the DPKO and the Secretary-General is worth exploring: the argument that it was unwise to confront the Security Council in January 1994 since this was more than what the membership could bear. There are perhaps also those who find it within good reason that the Secretary-General waited until 22 April to confront the Council's unwillingness and initiate an (ambiguous) promotion of an intervention. This article does not.

However, in this reasoning it is inexplicable that, after having adopted a strategy to confront this reluctance, he still misled the public by playing on a racist mythology. Consequently, he was not only playing the game of the extremists, who claimed that the crisis was based in ethnic animosities (and thus not organized mass murder), but also sustaining public unwillingness to act. The point of this is not to deny the legal and moral responsibility of the Security Council and of states in general. My point is the rather different one that the Secretary-General deliberately deprived the states of their responsibility to act by invalidating his very own claim of there being a genocide. In so doing, he continually pursued a policy of serving the politicians, who wanted to avoid their obligations to international law, rather than the victims in Rwanda.

We have demonstrated that the Secretariat had received substantial information during the first three months of 1994 on the planning of killings and other efforts to circumvent the Arusha Peace Agreement.

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<sup>63</sup> United Nations Information Centre for the Nordic Countries, '*Rwanda*', newsletter, Sept. 1996, p.11. The budget for the first six months of UNAMIR II was US\$115 million.

<sup>64</sup> My italics. Adelman and Surhke (n.25 above), p.42.

Initially, the Secretariat sought to contain the alarming situation in Rwanda, but later it abandoned these efforts and when the crisis broke it indirectly deprived the Security Council of responsibility and thus refrained from providing political leadership in favour of an intervention. Given this, three essential questions remain. First, why would the Secretary-General and the Secretariat of the United Nations adopt a policy of refraining from providing political leadership? Second, was this policy of any significance? And third, will such a policy matter be applied to future humanitarian crises?

*Why such a policy?* To confront the unwillingness of the permanent Security Council powers to intervene in another civil war would have required an initiative the Secretariat was unwilling to provide. However, as during the first months of 1994 it became increasingly aware of the possibility of an impending disaster in Rwanda, they did not want to be blamed for having withheld crucial advance information. When the Secretariat then in a very informal way approached what it perceived as 'key countries', it was met with a stunning silence, which determined it not to pursue the matter further. However, the buck had now been passed. When disaster struck, a troublesome dilemma faced the Secretariat: should it pretend to be as surprised as everyone else or should the Secretary-General stand up and admit that he or his Secretariat had actually known about the potential dangers for months? The apparent result was that the willy-nilly policy was continued – with the Secretary-General trying to please both the unwilling governments of major powers in the Council, with the increasing public demand for action – while at the same time it tried not to offend the Rwandan government perpetrating this genocide and its French allies. Hence this strange and inconsistent policy.

*Did the policy make any difference?* The French intervention was provoked by public opinion realizing that the violence in Rwanda was not anarchic, but systematically instigated by the French supported government, and that it amounted to genocide. This turning point came very late, but since Rwanda during this period was nearly closed to the outside world, it is highly likely that the Secretariat, given its unique sources of information, could have significantly diminished the distorted view of Rwanda that prevailed in the media – and through this hasten an intervention. In fact, the Secretary-General and the Secretariat might not have been able to prevent this genocide from happening altogether, but it is certainly possible that with a different policy they could have prompted an earlier intervention, thereby saving literally thousands of African lives.

*Will such a policy matter in the future?* One can certainly agree with DPKO officials that Western politicians are by nature neither the most courageous nor the most altruistic. However, since Western politicians cannot afford to be completely ignorant of ongoing massacres, this means humanitarian organizations in general and the Secretary-General of the UN in particular are not completely powerless. But to hope that early, swift and decisive international action in response to tomorrow's Rwandas or Bosnias can be achieved by vague pleas for action, or indeed without anything but rigorous leadership from the humanitarian community, amounts to wishful thinking. Kofi Annan and Boutros-Ghali have proven themselves unprepared to fill this position by refraining from using the power entrusted in them. Also, the problem extends much further than to these two individuals at the executive level in the Secretariat. Maybe their policy does not constitute a legal problem, but it is certainly a serious moral one for people who are meant to uphold principles of humanity. It certainly constitutes a serious political problem for those wishing to prevent the Rwandas of tomorrow.

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