

Britain's Role in Rwanda's 1994 Genocide

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*In the hundreds of media articles on the 1994 Rwanda genocide, there is barely a mention of Britain being a permanent member of the UN security council and in any way responsible for what happened. I recounted Britain's role in my previous book, *The Great Deception*, so I will not repeat everything here. Since then, however, another book, by Linda Melvern, an investigative journalist, confirms the quite terrible British, and US, role.*

After the killings began in early April 1994, the UN security council, instead of beefing up it's peace mission in the country and giving it a stronger mandate to intervene, decided to reduce the troop presence from 2,500 to 270. This decision sent a green light to those who had planned the genocide that the UN would not intervene. A small UN military force arrived merely to rescue expats, and then left. Belgium's senior army officer in the UN peace mission believed that if this force had not been pulled out, the killing could have been stopped. Canadian general Romeo Dallaire, who commanded the UN force in Rwanda, later said that this evacuation showed “inexcusable apathy by the sovereign states that made up the UN, that is completely beyond comprehension and moral acceptability”.

It was Britain's ambassador to the UN, Sir David Hannay, who proposed that the UN pull out its force; the US agreed. According to Melvern, it was left to the Nigerian ambassador, Ibrhaim Gambari, to point out that tens of thousands of civilians were dying at the time. Gambari also pleaded with the security council to reinforce the UN presence. But the US objected and Britain agreed, suggesting only to leave behind a token force, which became the 270 personnel.

On the security council at the time sat – by chance – Rwanda, as one of the ten non-permanent members. So British and US indifference and their policy of reducing the UN force, as expressed in the security council, was reported back to those directing the genocide in Rwanda. Melvern notes that “confident of no significant international opposition, it was decided to push ahead with further ‘pacification’ in the south” of the country. This led to tens of thousands more murders.

Romeo Dallaire, who had pleaded for reinforcements, complained that:

“My force was standing knee deep in mutilated bodies, surrounded by the guttural moans of dying people, looking into the eyes of dying children bleeding to death with their wounds burning in the sun and being invaded by maggots and flies. I found myself walking through villages where the only sign of life was a goat, or a chicken, or a songbird, as all the people were dead, their bodies being eaten by voracious packs of wild dogs”.

By May, with certainly tens of thousands and perhaps hundreds of thousands already dead, there was another UN proposal – to despatch 5,500 troops to help stop the massacres. This deployment was delayed by pressure mainly from the US ambassador, but with strong support from Britain. Dallaire believes that if these troops had been speedily deployed, tens of thousands more lives could have been saved. But the US and the British argued that before these troops went in, there needed to be a ceasefire in Rwanda, a quite insane suggestion given that one side was massacring innocent civilians. The US also ensured that this plan was watered down so that troops would have no mandate to use force to end the massacres.

Britain and the US also refused to provide the military airlift capability for the African states that were offering troops for this force. The RAF, for example, had plenty of transport aircraft that could have been deployed. Eventually, with delays continuing and thousands being killed by the day, Britain offered a measly 50 trucks. Lynda Chalker, then minister for overseas development, visited Dallaire in Rwanda in July. He gave her his list of requirements at the same time as noting that “I was up to my knees in bodies by then”. The 50 trucks had still not yet materialised. But later, on BBC2’s *Newsnight*, Chalker blamed Dallaire’s lack of resources on “the UN” which “ought to get its procurement right”.

Britain also went out of its way to ensure that the UN did not use the word “genocide” to describe the slaughter. Accepting that genocide was occurring would have obliged states to “prevent and punish” those guilty under the terms of the Geneva convention. In late April 1994, Britain, along with the US and China, secured a security council resolution that rejected the use of the term “genocide”. This resolution was drafted by the British.

The Czech republic’s ambassador to the UN, Karel Kovanda, confronted the security council about the fact of genocide at this time. He said that talking about withdrawing peacekeepers and getting a ceasefire was “rather like wanting Hitler to reach a ceasefire with the Jews”. There were objections to his comments, Kovanda said, and British and US diplomats quietly told him that on no account was he to use such inflammatory language outside the security council.

A July 1994 resolution spoke of “possible acts of genocide” and other security council documents used similarly restrained language. A year after the slaughters, the British Foreign Office sent a letter to an international enquiry saying that it still did not accept the term genocide. It said that it saw a discussion about whether the massacres constituted genocide as “sterile”.

Linda Melvern was told by UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali that during the genocide he had individual private meetings with the British and US ambassadors (the US ambassador was Madeleine Albright, who went on to become Clinton’s secretary of state). Boutros-Ghali urged both of them to help stop the killing but said their reaction was: “Come on, Boutros, relax... Don’t put us in a difficult position...the mood is not for intervention, you will obtain nothing...we will not move”.

Let me summarise the British government's contribution to the genocide in Rwanda. *Britain used its diplomatic weight to severely reduce a UN force that, according to military officers on the ground, could have prevented the killings. It then helped ensure the delay of other plans for intervention, which sent a direct green light to the murderers in Rwanda to continue. Britain also refused to provide the capability for other states to intervene, while blaming the lack of such capability on the UN. Throughout, Britain helped ensure that the UN did not use the word "genocide" so the UN would not act, using diplomatic pressure on others to ensure this did not happen. British officials went out of their way to promote these policies and rebuffed personal pleas to help stop the killings from the UN Secretary General and the commander of the UN force.*

All this information is publicly available. We do not need to look over the Atlantic to think of trials of those who have acquiesced in genocide. There is a long list of British policy makers who are to some degree responsible - Prime Minister John Major, Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd, Defence Secretary Malcolm Rifkind, Overseas Development Minister Lynda Chalker and UN ambassador Sir David Hannay foremost among them. But these people are being protected by the silence of the media and academia as well as the extreme lack of accountability in the political system.

Melvorn notes that, especially in the early stages of the genocide, the press insisted on reporting events as "chaos and anarchy", not a systematic campaign well planned in advance by Hutu extremists. In her view, "the media's failure to report that genocide was taking place, and thereby generate public pressure for something to be done to stop it, contributed to international indifference and inaction, and possibly to the crime itself".

There was only one press article I could find that went into any detail on Britain's role on the security council. It noted that Britain's ambassador at the UN was still dealing regularly with the ambassador of the government engaged in state-sponsored genocide.

Neither did the mother of parliaments attempt to address the British role in genocide - either at the time, or since. A debate in the House of Commons did not take place until nearly two months after the slaughter began. According to Melvorn, "the Labour party waited until May before putting pressure on the government to act, and then only because Oxfam telephoned the office of David Clark, shadow secretary of state for defence".

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