

On Invoking Rwanda to Attack Syria

A Conversation with Paul Rusesabagina

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*President Barack Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, and Prime Minister David Cameron have all by now invoked Rwanda, 1994, as reason to drop Cruise Missiles on Syria, so I spoke to Paul Rusesabagina, whose autobiography, *An Ordinary Man*, became the Hollywood movie *Hotel Rwanda*, in the interest of clarifying the invocation.*

As Paul explained to Daniel Kovalik here in CounterPunch, in [Hotel Rwanda Revisited: an Interview with Paul Rusesabagina](#), his book was greatly simplified in the Hollywood movie. It ended, for one, as he and his reunited family departed for Tanzania all smiles, in 1994, though they didn't actually leave Rwanda till he'd been threatened with life in prison and survived an assassination attempt in 1996.

Having just read his book, I can confirm that it resembles the Hollywood movie in no more than a few heroic plot elements, and I can't recommend it highly enough, not only on its literary merits, but also to anyone who wants to understand the human catastrophe that engulfed first Rwanda, and then its neighbor, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, beginning in the 1990s. Here's my conversation with Paul Rusesabagina.

ANN GARRISON: Paul, because I read your book, I know that you didn't like the government of Juvenal Habyarimana, the Hutu president who tried to make you wear a button bearing his image on your lapel pin. You didn't like the Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front that invaded Rwanda from Uganda in 1990. And you belonged to a political party pushing for political inclusion and power sharing between Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa. I also know that you didn't appreciate the foreign powers pulling the strings. I know that the Tutsi genocide was the conclusion of the four year Rwandan Civil War which displaced millions of Hutu people who fled from the Tutsi army advancing in the country's north. And that hundreds of thousands of them were clustered in refugee camps encircling Kigali, living in absolutely miserable conditions, and that those refugee camps became recruiting grounds for the genocidal interahamwe militia. So you tell a very complex story, not the simple story of evil Hutus suddenly massacring innocent Tutsis in 100 days, which is the story that most of the world's been told about the Rwanda Genocide. Could you say something about why that simple story keeps being told?

PAUL RUSESABAGINA: When people hear about it from outside, they take it as something that came out of nowhere, found itself in a given place, Rwanda, on a given day, then continued for 100 days, and then disappeared. But before the president's assassination and then the genocide, there were many signs that something was going to happen, although until it took place, we never realized what it would be or how bad. Now most of the world believes that the genocide disappeared on July 4th, 1994, because the Rwandan Patriotic

Front, the victors in the Rwandan Civil War, tell us that it disappeared that day, but that is not true. Killings, massacres, crimes against humanity, and war crimes kept repeating themselves, not only in Rwanda but also in the Congo.

AG: In the book, you wrote that during the Rwandan Genocide, 8000 people were killed every day of 100 days, five every minute, and that you can barely stand to think about the way they died. In the end, your hotel was able to save only about 1200 people, four hours worth. You wrote that the world abandoned Rwanda, and I know that you think the world then abandoned the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the war and conflict that ensued to this day. Now that all the headlines have gone to Syria, as they did to Afghanistan and Iraq, does it seem that the world is abandoning the Congolese people again?

PR: Yes, but I'm not surprised that the Congolese have been abandoned by the whole world for so long. The Congo being a part of Africa and Africa being one of the most forgotten continents, I am not surprised that more than six million people have died of the war there, since the Rwanda Genocide, or that most of the world remains silent.

AG: The Western powers on the Security Council, did actually intervene in Rwanda in 1994, in some ways. For one, the Security Council imposed an arms embargo on Rwanda's existing government as the Rwandan Patriotic Front Army advanced on the capital. And the U.S. trained the Rwandan Patriotic Front Army's general, who is now Rwanda's President Paul Kagame, at Fort Leavenworth. You wrote in your book that the French were supporting the existing Rwandan government in the civil war.

Still you appealed to the very powers waging a proxy war in Rwanda to stop it.

PR: Well, as I always say, behind each and every dictatorship in Africa, and in developing countries, there is always a Western superpower which is manipulating what is going on on the ground. The Rwandan Civil War began when the Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Army invaded Rwanda from Uganda in 1990. At that time, France was behind Rwanda's Hutu government and Rwanda transacted business in French. But the English speaking powers, wanted more power in the region, so they supported that invasion by the Rwandan Patriotic Army, which was an army of mostly Tutsi refugees who spoke English because they grew up in Uganda and Tanzania. And their strategy was to get Rwanda to get into the Congo, which is enormously rich in minerals and oil. There's a jungle between eastern and western Congo, and no modern infrastructure to connect the two, so France and the English speaking countries were competing for power in the countries on the eastern border of Congo, to get into eastern Congo. The Rwandan Civil War that ended in the genocide was a kind of economic war for the wealth of the eastern Congo.

There was a loser and there was a winner, and the winner has been, and is still to this day, writing history.

AG: But you appealed to the very powers waging this proxy war in Rwanda to stop it. Could you explain how they could have?

PR: The US and the UK and France should have changed their self-interested strategies before the bloodbath that shocked the world. They should have come to the table to negotiate with each other about what they wanted and they should have brought the parties that went to war in Rwanda to the table with them.

I believe, as you read in my autobiography, in the powers of words. Even now, I believe that one day, the Rwandan government, which has been trying to confuse everything through guns, will be forced to put down their guns, sit around the table, and through words, through dialogue, resolve the conflict.

AG: Well Professor Charles Kambanda wrote this week, in [The Proxy Lake](#), that it's of paramount importance that the UN Security Council impose an arms embargo on Rwanda now, to stop the conflict in Congo. Do you agree?

PR: I agree with him 100 percent. Why is Rwanda always trying to silence each and every neighbor who raises a voice? It is because of guns. Why did they win the war in 1994? It is because the international community became concerned about the violence in Rwanda, so the Security Council passed an arms embargo against the Rwandan government in May 1994. And in July, the Rwandan government lost the war. So, without weapons, those guys would have to sit down and talk.

AG: And what about the so-called peace talks going on in Kampala, Uganda's capital, right now, including UN envoy Mary Robinson and US envoy Russ Feingold. Do you have any hope for this process?

PR: I have seen this going on for many years. I saw those peace talks going on in Arusha, Tanzania, including the Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, who was backing Kagame's Rwandan Patriotic Front. And today, he and Kagame are backing M23, the militia fighting in eastern Congo's North Kivu Province.

I saw them negotiate with [President Habyarimana](#) and they even signed a peace agreement. And then, after signing a peace agreement, they killed him. Then, after killing him, they took power, without sharing. So I know that the Congolese government is clever enough to discover what kind of game Kagame is playing behind their back. He is playing the same game. He is buying time, so that he can reorganize his M23, probably with a new name to make it seem like a new force if his M23 agrees to disband and disarm. Why didn't they call this urgent meeting for the presidents of the Great Lakes Region before, when M23 was winning? It is because they were on the winning side. Now M23, a part of the Rwandan army under Rwandan command, is on the losing side, so they are buying time. And I know that all the region, Congolese, Tanzanians, Burundese, all of them are aware of this, through experience, unless history doesn't teach us anything.

AG: And what about Uganda's role as a broker here, as the host of these peace talks?

PR: I think it's just a sham. Uganda has been accused many times by the international community, including the United Nations and the Congolese government, as one of the perpetrators. But today, Uganda positions itself as a mediator. How can one be a perpetrator and a mediator at the same time? Can one be a perpetrator and a judge? No, it can't be.

So this is why the "peace talks" taking place in Kampala, Uganda, are just a kind of facade.

AG: OK, President Kagame and particularly his Foreign Minister Louise Mushikiwabo have been called upon to attest to the urgency of intervention in Syria, to as so many say, "stop the next Rwanda." Do you think this is sincere?

PR: I know Kagame, and I know Louise since she was a young lady. They are trying once

again to distract the international community's attention to what is going on in Syria, so that they forget what Kagame, Louise Mushikiwabo, the Rwandan government, and the Rwandan army are doing in the Congo, where their notorious M23 is well-known as an organization that has been raping women, recruiting child soldiers, and killing civilians, so that they can do what they do there without any attention, without any witness.

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