

Unworthy Victims: Houthis in Yemen, Hutus in Burundi

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Last week the U.S. helped its Saudi pals bomb another hospital and school in Yemen, killing 25, including at least 10 children. Don't imagine that its intentions are any more humanitarian in Burundi just because they're not selling fighter bomber jets, MK-84 laser guided bombs or GBU-31 satellite-guided bombs to their pal Paul Kagame, Rwanda's president for life. Kagame is intent on bringing down President Pierre Nkurunziza's government in Burundi, as Saudi sheikhs are intent on bringing down the Houthi government in Yemen.

There are no multibillion dollar weapons sales motivating the U.S. to support a coup in Burundi, but access to the strategic mineral wealth required to manufacture weapons is among the stakes. Burundi has nickel, gold, copper, uranium, tungsten, tin, peat, platinum, limestone, vanadium, tantalum, niobium, kaolin and cobalt. Though its output has not yet been globally significant, its government has contracted with a Russian firm to mine its nickel reserves, and [Bloomberg today quotes a Chinese source predicting a bull market in nickel](#) just beginning. Nickel is used to make stainless steel, and nickel alloys are used in electronics, specialist engineering, space vehicles, submarines and the tubing used in desalination plants for converting sea water into fresh water. I haven't seen Burundi's mining contract with the Russian firm, but I've been told that the Russians valued the country's nickel reserves far higher than Western firms and offered a much better deal.

More importantly, Burundi shares a western border with the scandalously mineral rich eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and an eastern border with Tanzania, an East African nation with an Indian Ocean port that is also leaning towards the East in the heightening competition between Eastern and Western axes of power.

If the U.S. and Rwanda succeed in taking down the government of President Pierre Nkurunziza, we won't see video of hair-raising Pentagon special effects. Instead we'll hear more preposterous rhetoric about the world's obligation to "intervene," ignoring Burundi's sovereignty, to "stop genocide" or "stop the next Rwanda." This argument has also been used to justify war in Yugoslavia, Libya, Syria and even Iraq, where genetic damage caused by toxic U.S. munitions is the most literal genocide the world has yet seen.

The "stop the next Rwanda" argument is more easily made in Burundi because Rwandans and Burundians are close to being the same people. They share both a border and a Hutu majority, Tutsi minority demographic. Their languages, Burundi's Kirundi and Rwanda's Kinyarwanda, vary only slightly.

This recently shrill warning from the UN and the Voice of America – [UN: Violence, Hatred Against Burundi Tutsis Could Presage Genocide](#) – is one more in a steady stream published in the U.S. and European press since President Pierre Nkurunziza’s re-election in July 2015. In a nation in which these two groups, Hutus and Tutsis, have been historically polarized and have massacred one another in competitions for power, this is akin to shouting fire in a crowded theatre. If there is an outbreak of violence between Hutus and Tutsis in Burundi, the U.S. will bear huge responsibility as [it did for the Rwandan war of 1990 to 1994](#), which ended in horrific massacres of both groups as U.S. ally Paul Kagame seized power.

Here’s some context that you won’t find in the Western propaganda about Burundi during the past year:

1) Some, most notably Rwandan scholar [Léopold Munyakazi](#), have argued that Hutus and Tutsis are best understood as social classes, not ethnic groups, and the Rwandan war of the 1990s as a class war, not a genocide. Hutus and Tutsis share the same language and culture, eat the same food, and marry each other, and the vast majority are Christian. The Tutsis were a pre-colonial ruling class, the Hutus their peasant subjects, until the Hutus rose up in 1959, in what is sometime called the Rwandan Revolution, sometimes the Hutu Revolution. By 1961 Rwanda had transitioned from a Belgian colony led by a Tutsi monarchy to an independent nation led by elected Hutu politicians and intellectuals.

2) In 1990, U.S.-backed Tutsi general Paul Kagame led a refugee army that invaded Rwanda from Uganda to seize power, re-establish a de facto Tutsi dictatorship, and establish the U.S. as the dominant power in Rwanda, displacing France. The U.S., Europe and Israel have long found it convenient to favor the Tutsis and depict them as the endangered minority without acknowledging that Hutus suffered for centuries under the Tutsi ruling class or that Hutus as well as Tutsis were massacred by extremists in what came to be known as the Rwandan Genocide. In Rwanda and Burundi, the U.S. and its allies have deemed the Tutsis to be “worthy victims,” the Hutus “unworthy victims,” [in the parlance of Professor Edward S. Herman](#), co-author with David Peterson of [The Politics of Genocide](#) and [Enduring Lies: Rwanda in the Propaganda System 20 Years On](#).

3) On October 21, 1993, violence and massacres broke out in Burundi after elites in the Tutsi army assassinated the first Hutu president, political intellectual Melchior Ndadaye. Hundreds of thousands of Burundians, mostly Hutus, were slain, largely because the Tutsi elite still controlled the army. A civil war began and didn’t end until 2005. President Pierre Nkurunziza is a Hutu, but Hutus and Tutsis have been integrated in both the government and the army, with the Tutsis enjoying larger percentages because they are perceived, as the minority, to be in greater need of representation.

4) On April 6, 1994, the 100 days of violence known as the “Rwandan Genocide” or, in Rwanda, “genocide against the Tutsi,” began immediately after the assassination of two more Hutu presidents, Rwanda’s Juvenal Habyarimana and Burundi’s Cyprien Ntaryamira. Their plane was shot out of the sky over Rwanda’s capital, Kigali, as they returned from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, but this assassination of two African presidents was never investigated by the highly politicized International Criminal Tribunal on Rwanda, which prosecuted only Hutus. Susan Thomson, a scholar of Rwandan history and politics and persona non grata in Rwanda, has described what followed in a video interview for a documentary film in progress: “There were pogroms, there were

massacres on both sides, disinformation on all sides. At the elite level, as you go down the food chain, people are scared. Regardless of ethnicity, regardless of region, religion, whatever cleavage you want to choose, Rwandans were caught up in the violence. So it's absurd to say that only Tutsis are victims."

Now, to repeat two points about the assassination of three presidents: On October 3, 1993, massacres and then civil war broke out in Burundi after the assassination of the country's first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye. On April 6, 1994, Rwanda's famous hundred days of massacres broke out after the assassination of two more Hutu presidents, Rwanda's Juvenal Habyarimana and Burundi's Cyprien Ntaryamira. Therefore, if the U.S. were really trying to prevent genocide in Burundi, wouldn't they be trying to prevent the assassination of another Hutu president, Burundi's Pierre Nkurunziza? Rwandans and Burundians who understand this history know that Nkurunziza's assassination would be a catastrophe and know that U.S.-backed insurgents would like to assassinate him, whether the U.S. approved such a plan or not. The months since Nkurunziza's re-election in July 2015 have been punctuated by the assassination of upper-level army commanders and government officials close to him.

In the third week of [November 2015, Agence France Presse \(AFP\) reported](#) that "Burundian insurgents" had fired mortar rounds at the presidential palace in Burundi's capital city, Bujumbura. Near the same time, I spoke to former UN official Jeff Drumtra about his documentation of [Rwanda's recruitment of Burundian refugees to form a new rebel army to destabilize Burundi](#). I also asked him about the mortar rounds fired at the presidential palace, to which he responded, "I can say, having worked on issues of Rwanda and Burundi on and off for more than 20 years, that we know, historically, that the violence gets worse and the risk of mass atrocities becomes much more serious when both sides feel that they have been victimized. And so, a mortar attack on the presidential palace . . . if it were to hit its mark and actually create a large number of deaths, or even the death of a president . . . would certainly create a situation where the ruling party and everyone who voted for the ruling party in Burundi would feel victimized at a whole new level. And if something like that were to happen, that's when, historically, violence in Burundi becomes much worse, and that's what everybody fears here."

I then contacted the U.S. State Department and asked whether they were not alarmed by AFP's report of mortar fire aimed at the presidential palace, considering that the massacres of the 1990s in both Rwanda and Burundi had broken out after the assassination of Hutu presidents.

State took the question quite casually and responded that they had submitted a query on my behalf to their Ambassador in Burundi's capital, Bujumbura, and they'd get back to me when he responded. They never did, and that should be the end of any fantasies that the U.S. is trying to stop genocide in Burundi. The State Department is usually helpful when a question doesn't threaten their dominant narrative. In Rwanda and Burundi, that dominant narrative has long been that Tutsis are the victims or potential victims to be protected from the Hutus. Hutus are the perpetrators to be tried at the International Criminal Tribunal on Rwanda, imprisoned, hunted down in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and demonized as subhuman killers driven by innate bloodlust and singular determination to kill Tutsis. That narrative is repeated endlessly by Western media, as in this 02.19.2002 Guardian report, "[Pastor who led Tutsis to slaughter is jailed](#)." Former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark represented the pastor, Pastor Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, at the International Criminal Tribunal on Rwanda and called his conviction "[a travesty of justice](#)."

Like the Houthis in Yemen, the Hutus have been deemed unworthy victims by the U.S. State Department, though for centuries they were the oppressed class in what is now Rwanda and Burundi, and though hundreds of thousands of them, perhaps as many as a million, have been massacred in the horrific violence of the last 50 years in Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Like most Burundians and Rwandans that I know – Hutus and Tutsis – I would love to see this virulent bigotry land in the dustbin of history along with the “Hutu” and “Tutsi” distinctions that have alienated people in this part of the world from one another, but that will not happen so long as the West gives singular victim status to the Tutsis and demonizes the Hutus in its humanitarian interventionist ideology.

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