

Rwandan Genocide and Humanity

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I was in Rwanda a few days ago. I went there for an ICT Summit organized by the International Telecommunication Union. There were about 1000 attendees, mostly from Africa. There were 7 or 8 heads of state, many ministers, and high-ranking diplomats. I was quite absorbed in the Summit through most of my stay. Though the genocide of Rwanda was on my mind, and I probed people a bit here and a bit there about it, it was not easy to find out much. People are not yet used to discussing it freely.

On the day of my return, however, my colleague Sandro Radicella and I went for a visit the genocide museum not far from the hotel where I stayed. I intellectually knew what to expect but was not prepared for how I would react. This is an inadequate summary.

First some basic facts: I cannot obviously go into too many details and have not myself made thorough research. I base my statements roughly on what I learnt at the museum.

For centuries the two major ethnic groups of Rwanda, the Hutu and the Tutsi, had shared the same language, the same history, and same cultural practices. They lived with each another, attended the same schools, worked in the same fields, and lived in the same neighborhoods. They did look quite different. Through a number of intermarriages, however, one could often not tell between two sisters born out of a Hutu-Tutsi marriage as to which was a typical Hutu and which a typical Tutsi.

The rest of it is shatteringly depressing. It is enough to say that the Belgian occupation formalized the distinction, almost meaninglessly, between the Hutu and the Tutsi in terms of appearance; and it suited the purpose of the Rwandan government of the early 1990's to perpetrate the distinction. Through attacks, virulent propaganda, and persistent political maneuvering, the ruling people of that time significantly widened divisions between Hutu and Tutsi. By March 1994, Hutu power structure decided (in part responding to the rebel movement of the Tutsi, which is another story that I do not want to recount here) to slaughter massive numbers of the Tutsi with the intent to eliminate them; moderate Hutu were included as well. The slaughter was executed methodically, by deliberately marking people to be eliminated, and by importing enough arms by businessmen--even machetes; I learnt that the machetes were large enough in number to arm every third adult Hutu male. In a matter of some 100 days, some 800,000 to 1,000,000 Rwandans were methodically hunted down and murdered. It was as deliberate as can be.

What did we, the rest of the world, do?

The commander of the UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda at the time said he would be able to stop the killing if he was given 5,000 troops. In its great wisdom, the UN Security Council pulled out the existing peacekeeping troops, leaving behind some 200 soldiers, who were ordered not to intervene in the massacre. Nobody was interested in Rwanda. No one cared about the Rwandans.

The extremist Hutu, seeing no opposition from the international community, engaged in hacking to death defenseless families and using guns and grenades to blow up frightened children. The state radio

controlled by extremists encouraged the killings by propagating hate and revealing the locations of the Tutsi in hiding. The killers included journalists, doctors, educators, peasants---the young as well as the old. In some local villages, militiamen forced Hutus to kill their Tutsi neighbors or be killed themselves. They raped the women; they raped them and then killed them; they let mutilated bodies to rot on streets or float down the river; they killed the children; the children killed children. In one case, 1,200 Tutsis who had sought refuge in a church were killed from 8 AM until nightfall, as if it was a day's successful work well done. They sought out wounded survivors in hospitals and killed them.

Finally, the Security Council voted to send up to 5,000 soldiers to Rwanda, but without establishing a timetable. The mighty US pledged 50 soldiers who never arrived.

The killings ended only after armed Tutsi units, invading from neighboring countries, managed to defeat the extremist Hutus and halt the genocide. By then, a tenth of the population had been killed.

'Never again' has been said after Jews were systematically obliterated by the Nazis. 'Never again' was said after the killing spree in Cambodia. It was said after Yugoslavia, it has been said after Rwanda. It is being said about Darfur. There were Armenians, the Australian Aborigines and the Native Americans before then, and so forth. 'Never again' has been said too many times in our history and now it is a phrase without meaning.

I fear that the human memory is short. Each generation seems to gravitate towards the same mistakes. Each generation seems to forget that the essence of humanity requires one to remember and confront this kind of shameful and ugly heritage. In addition to systematically obliterating different races of people, the humans have obliterated many species on earth, animals both majestic and small, forests and plants, and essentially everything in sight. We, humans, have been the greatest curse on this Earth.

Should I leave you with this thought? I somehow think not. I want to say why I feel hopeful, for at least part of the time. My hope comes from the fact that we produced Buddha, Mozart and Einstein; we are the same species that created Mother Teresa. May be there is some hope after all---somewhere, somehow.

What about Rwanda herself? No nation can recover fully from the wounds in which a tenth of the population was systematically exterminated. One never knows for sure about all those who have survived, either. No one can probe the depths of their psyche adequately. What psychiatric treatment can possibly heal them entirely? I don't know. Nevertheless, in a short span of 13 years, the country has come out of this extraordinary scar on its psyche and seems to be functioning like a mature society. It functions with a will to succeed, with a greater sense of destiny than some other African nations. It has tried to obliterate the formality of making the distinctions that led to this mindless devastation. It is focusing on education, science, technology, poverty, millennium goals, and so forth. If it succeeds, it speaks to the tremendous spirit of Rwandans and will justify our optimism about humanity itself. That will be enough reason for me to wake up every morning and think that my own work has meaning, and will not be washed down the drain by hiccups of monumental disgrace.