



Rwanda and Its Aftermath: Why There Must Be a War Crimes Trial

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[Editor's Note: Calling the perpetrators of violence to account is essential to restoring a viable society to Rwanda. M&GS asked Napoleon Abdulai, the editor of Africa World Review, to offer his views on the need for a war crimes tribunal in Rwanda. M&GS 1994;1:128-29]

"There is nothing wrong with feeding the distressed, but the international community also has to arrest those responsible for the crimes committed in Rwanda if it doesn't want to reinforce the belief among the Hutus that the genocide of the Tutsis was justifiable." -- James Fannell, Care International

"Reconciliation cannot be built on impunity. Justice must be the pillar of national reconciliation." -- President Pasteur Bizimungu, Rwanda

Ever since the world allowed the leadership of the Khmer Rouge to walk away scot free after killing more than one million Cambodians in the 1970s, crimes against humanity have taken a turn for the worse. Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge, had his soldiers fed and clothed by an alliance including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR),

Western NGOs, and the Chinese and American governments. After operating from Thailand for more than a decade, Pol Pot's organisation boycotted a United Nations supervised election last year. Since the election, Pol Pot's men have resumed fighting, kidnapping foreigners in their attempt to seize state power once again.

What is the connection between Cambodia in Southeast Asia and Rwanda in central Africa? Put bluntly, genocide is genocide in all six inhabited continents.

With a pre-war population of more than eight million people, Rwanda has just gone through the worst mass killing in recent memory -- more than 500,000 people by most estimates. The killings were organised and executed by the recently defeated armed forces of Rwanda and by a militia trained and armed by the defeated army, with the help of foreign troops, including the Egyptians and the French. The link with Cambodia is that more than half a million people have died as a result of the genocide; the contrast is that this slaughter took only three months to accomplish, whereas in Cambodia Pol Pot

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required a few years.

With the defeat of the extremist government in July, a systematic war crimes trial of all those who organised and carried out the genocide is urgently needed, because genocide, or mass killing on an ethnic basis, has recently occurred in Africa without punishment, and the more such crimes are tolerated, the more likely they are to recur. In Uganda, from 1971 to 1979, a ruthless and well known military dictator, Idi Amin, organised the killings of thousands of Ugandans. Today Amin lives in peace in Saudi Arabia. Between 1980 and February 1986, more than 100,000 Banyarwandans perished in Uganda and no one has taken the trouble to find the killers.

Rwanda shares borders with Uganda and Zaire, and the planners of the current genocide knew how the international community had reacted to the massacres of their neighbours. This knowledge encouraged them to organise the genocide. Some of the planners of the Rwandan genocide, now based in Zaire, are openly suggesting that if Amin is to evade retribution, so should their own military and political leaders.

Perhaps if Amin and the killers in Uganda had faced a national or international tribunal, the right signal would have been sent to the rulers in Rwanda. Only in the west African state of Mali, where ex-president Musa Toari (a former military ruler) and some of his senior officers were tried for the massacre of innocent civilians in 1991, have any war criminals actually been brought to justice, although the new Ethiopian rulers are equally determined to try those alleged to be responsible for the killing of thousands of Ethiopians.

An international tribunal in Africa along the lines of the Nuremberg tribunals in 1945 and 1946 would have a significant impact on

Africa's development. Although ordinary African people have lived in peace for many years, almost every African country has some seeds of conflict. Since the 1970s, with the deterioration in economic life throughout Africa, the emergence of political elites across ethnic lines has resulted in even greater conflict. If the organisers of the Rwanda genocide are brought to trial, the African ruling elites will learn that they cannot continue to perpetrate massacres and genocides without consequence.

The trial of the Nazi war criminals in Nuremberg forced the fascists in Germany and their allies in Europe to realize that any future attempt to organise genocide would not be tolerated. Now that lesson is being lost. If the United Nations and the international community are to redeem their credibility, then they must move swiftly to establish the infrastructure for a tribunal in Rwanda, administered by impartial people with high integrity. It would be a disaster if the UN or some powerful states were to protect those individuals who deserve to stand trial. The world community must make the resources available to begin the war crimes tribunal now.

The world failed to speak out against the crimes committed by Pol Pot's government in Cambodia; the world cannot and must not protect the butchers of the Rwandese people (or the members of the international community who helped to set up the machinery for the genocide). African rulers must understand that the killers of moderate Hutus (including among the victims the late prime minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana, murdered on 7 April, 1994) and of half a million Tutsis cannot be allowed to pass like the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s. Justice must be done!

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