

The Rwanda Forum

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So what have we learned today?

The Rwandan genocide should teach us that early warning alone does not prevent genocide, because there were plenty of early warnings. The warnings must reach people who can act on them, people who make public policy, and those people must be politically compelled to act. Today the warnings of another ethnic cleansing in Sudan are loud and clear. Seven hundred thousand African refugees have fled into Chad while government-armed militias murder, rape and pillage their way across Darfur. Like 1994 in Rwanda, the UN and Western governments will send assistance to refugee camps, much of it too late to save the starving, thirsty, dying people of Darfur and their animals, but will the UN and the West act to overthrow the genocidal government in Khartoum? I doubt it. It might upset the peace process. Diplomats always want peace processes. Even when, like the Arusha peace process for Rwanda in 1993 and 1994 they become sideshows that distract attention from the preparations for genocide or ethnic cleansing that are going on in the main tent.

This comes from a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of genocide. Because, you see, genocide is not conflict. It is one-sided mass murder. The Jews had no conflict with the Nazis. Armenians posed no threat to Turks. Ukrainian farmers did not fight Stalin's Communist cadres. Bengalis did not try to massacre Pakistanis. Hutu intellectuals did not rise up against the Tutsi army in Burundi in 1972. Nor did Tutsis advocate mass murder of Hutus in Rwanda in 1994. Yet all of these groups were victims of genocide. Conflict resolution is not genocide prevention.

Since the founding of the United Nations in 1945 there have been at least 55 genocides and politicides. Over 70 million people have died, most murdered by their own governments, more than in all the wars combined. Genocide, unlike other human rights violations, can never be prevented or punished unless the government that perpetrates the crime is forcefully restrained or overthrown. And that is why the United Nations has largely been ineffective in preventing genocide. The UN is an association of states represented by governments that wave the flag of sovereignty whenever anyone challenges their domestic jurisdiction over internal affairs. Many of them in fact seem to believe that they have what Leo Kuper called the "sovereign right to commit genocide".

Many reports have recommended creating UN early warning and response institutions to prevent genocide. But so far none have been implemented. At first paralysed by the great power of veto during the Cold War, the UN is now paralysed by unwillingness of great powers to subject their policies to criticism, and fear among illegitimate governments that scrutiny of their human rights violations might invite intervention by international forces. Nevertheless, I believe that the United Nations remains our best hope to overcome the idolatry of national sovereignty in favour of the popular sovereignty that was advocated here in England by Locke, in France by Rousseau, in the United States by Jefferson, and around the world by many other people.

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An underlying premise of the genocide convention is that any regime that commits genocide forfeits its legitimacy and should be subject to the authority of international law and international intervention. The UN Security Council has the responsibility to protect against threats to international peace and security. Rwanda and Bosnia should teach the world that genocide is never simply an internal matter. Genocidal regimes never stop their predatory murders at their own borders, and they always bleed refugees. As Lemkin emphasised, genocide is a crime against all of humanity because it permanently reduces the cultural diversity that is humanity's heritage.

Sudan is not the only place where genocide is about to happen. How many of you know that in December 2003 the Ethiopian army and highlander militias massacred over 400 Anuaks in the lowland town of Gambela? And the murders and the mass rapes continue. Thousands of refugees fled to Sudan. The world hasn't noticed. Gambela province, where oil and gas were discovered four years ago, is a destination for resettled highlanders and the Ethiopian government has now declared that it's going to resettle one million highlanders into lowland areas of Ethiopia. Now these aren't early warnings, they're late alarms. The question is, will the UN or the great powers act? Will the African Union - which is headquartered in Addis Ababa - act? There are four reasons why I think they probably won't. But we have to honestly confront them if we're going to try to overcome the repeated paralysis that has characterised our responses to genocide.

The first is racism. Lives of black Africans are still not accorded equal value to lives of people from our own nationalities or races. African lives are still outside the circle of our moral concern when the cost to protect them may be the lives of our own sons and daughters. And I do not say that lightly, because my own son is a US Marine.

The second is the cult of state sovereignty and non-interference. The UN charter's prohibition on intervention on matters within the internal jurisdiction of member states has long been a licence to commit genocide. And yet I do think there is cause for hope here because the Rwandan genocide has seen a renewed recognition that governments have a responsibility to protect their citizens from genocide and if they fail, or even if they commit genocide themselves, then the UN does have a responsibility to intervene. However, the UN and other powers, other regional alliances can only do so effectively when a major military power is willing to take the lead. The recently augmented European Union forces in Eastern Congo and the French forces in Cote d'Ivoire and soon the UN peacekeeping force in Cote d'Ivoire are signs of hope. They are the result of a strong UN Secretary General and French leadership. And likewise, the United Kingdom has taken the lead in Sierra Leone to stop the arm-amputating, murderous criminal gangs of Foday Sankoh and Charles Taylor.

There is hope, I think, for intervention to stop genocide. A third reason has been addressed here by Ambassador Adama Dieng, an old friend. The two of us first were in Rwanda together in 1989. That reason is impunity. And neither Sudan nor Ethiopia are state parties to the Rome Treaty of the International Criminal Court. In fact, less than half of African states are. Russia, China, India, Pakistan and, yes, the United States, are also not state parties to the ICC. They represent half of the human race. Nigeria and Indonesia aren't even parties to the genocide convention. So many of the world's leaders know that they

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can commit genocide, ethnic cleansing and other crimes against humanity and get away with it. Unless, of course, they're overthrown and tried in national courts. But, by then they will have fled into exile and their relatives will be sending us e-mails about fortunes squirrelled away in Swiss banks.

Now the fourth reason, I believe, is that we just don't care enough to send our very best. UN rules of engagement, in fact, are weak. They are cowardly covers for the moral relativism of neutrality. And in genocide, only the stars in the sky can be neutral.

Now if we're going to prevent future genocides I think we need to construct several new international institutions. First, and I think very, very welcome, is the UN Secretary General's announcement that he is going to appoint a special adviser on genocide prevention - a person of international stature, to serve high in the United Nations, supported by UN agencies, and hopefully with the kind of resources he or she will need to give early warning far in advance of genocides. And I believe that the United States, the United Kingdom and many other key governments should create similar special advisory positions in their foreign ministries. Using models for early warning that have been developed by experts on genocide, this special adviser should recommend strategies for prevention in the volcanic hotspots on the fault lines of the world before they erupt into genocide.

Second, states party to the International Criminal Court, especially in Europe, should launch a co-ordinated diplomatic campaign for universal membership in the International Criminal Court to counter the cult of national sovereignty and the Bush administration's corrosive campaign against international law.

Third, regional organisations like NATO, the European Union, the African Union, should create rapid response forces of heavy infantry fully supported by airlifts, communications and supplies that are ready to intervene within days of the beginning of a genocide. And eventually I think the UN should have a standing staff committee as envisioned under articles 43-47 of the charter. And UN peacekeeping rules of engagement should be strengthened now.

Finally, and I think this a question that was raised in the speech just before by Ambassador Cooper, we will need to create the political will in our leaders to stop genocide and prevent genocide. Now the creation of political will is not some kind of mystery. You create political will by creating political movements that make it clear to political leaders that you will not put up with "I don't know"s, or "it was too late" or "we couldn't act." You make it clear to them that we will no longer tolerate inaction in the face of genocide. I come from a family that's been active in a couple of these political movements. My great-great-grandfather was an abolitionist who attended the 1840, the first world anti-slavery convention here in London, and he was secretary to that convention. And my great-great-grandmother, his wife, was Elizabeth Katie Stanton, who founded the women's suffrage movement in the United States. So you can see - I come from a long line of trouble-makers.

I am convinced that today, in the 21st century, we need a movement to prevent genocide equivalent to the anti-slavery movement of the 19th century, to the women's movement of the 19th and 20th century. We need a movement that will tap the power of every church

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and mosque and synagogue and temple to create a constituency of conscience, to tell our political leaders that we will no longer be bystanders to genocide, or we will vote them out of office.

