

## Conventional Wisdom and Rwanda's Genocide: An Opinion

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Certain thoughts about the Rwandan genocide of 1994 are commonly accepted. For the most part, these ideas have been used to explain the causes of the genocide and, by implication, propose solutions to Rwanda's continuing problems. The status of these ideas within the media and policy circles, however, is problematic. Despite the tentative nature of the propositions when they were first asserted only two or three years ago, they have come to represent what may be called the "conventional wisdom" about Rwanda. Rarely are the assumptions behind such ideas challenged.

The generation of such "conventional wisdom" is not unusual; every social situation requires explanation that becomes part of common accepted knowledge. The ultimate measure of such common knowledge is its utility in predicting the likely actions of participants in the situations described. In the Rwandan situation, however, this common knowledge has not always been a good guide for such predictions. Only rarely have particular policy prescriptions led to the desired outcomes. In particular, Western-generated humanitarian policy, focused on democratic political institutions, respect for human rights, principles of voluntary refugee repatriation, and open markets, has been repeatedly frustrated.

In large part, I think that such systematic misreading of the Rwandan refugee situation is due to the very nature of how information is gathered in emergency situations. Necessarily, the emergency workers on Rwanda's borders in 1994 quickly developed common knowledge about the crisis, the actors involved, and the solutions to the situation. This knowledge helped to rationalize their own interventions and guide their efforts. Experientially based perceptions obtained in the days of the four month-long genocide thus provided the foundation for distinct views about Rwanda's problems<sup>1</sup>.

Such experientially based knowledge is not inherently inaccurate or bad. The problem is that such knowledge, when unanalyzed, presents a fragmented, superficial, or incomplete picture of the emergency situation itself. This is particularly true when the individuals writing situation reports ("sitreps" in the sub-cultural argot) about the overall political situation are not part of the societies being analyzed. For the emergency specialist, this is almost always the case. Unfortunately, what happens in emergencies like the Rwanda genocide is that such views are uncritically passed on by a headquarters where, because of the urgency of the situation, sitreps are translated unanalyzed into emotional donor appeals and ReliefWeb documents. In turn, fleeting impressionistic views or opinions become the conventional wisdom shaping definitions of problems, accumulation of knowledge, and interpretation of "facts", and ultimately policy prescriptions<sup>2</sup>.

Complete faith in conventional wisdom is risky, however. To understand any social situation it is necessary to move beyond the limitations of experientially based conventional

<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v1/3/5.pdf>

wisdom<sup>3</sup>. Of course, doing this in an emergency is a source of discomfort, as it involves abandoning the few certainties already legitimated both in a remote headquarters and the field, and acknowledging the risky contingent nature of emergency management. Nonetheless, both analysis of and prescriptions for social problems stand to benefit from exploring and unearthing the potential oversimplifications located within conventional wisdom.

Below are seven items of "conventional wisdom" from the Rwanda refugee crisis which, in my view, misrepresent a complex reality and have served as poor guides for policy interventions. In particular, these assumptions are inconsistent with broader understandings of social behavior. The issues will be familiar to anyone who has followed the development of the Rwandan crisis as it was discussed on policy levels, on ReliefWeb, and in the popular press. And while the examples have to do with the Rwandan relief operation, my own bit of conventional wisdom is to point out that the problems illustrated here are probably inherent in the very nature of emergency relief programs, and are not unique to the Rwanda program. Certainly policy errors based on such conventional wisdom were a major focus in William Shawcross' book, *Quality of Mercy*, about the Cambodian crisis of 1979-83. My suspicion is that field personnel and policy makers associated with the ex-Yugoslavian, Somali, Liberian, and other emergency operations will recognize the pattern of quick conclusions based on fleeting experience, with no subsequent sociological analysis.

#### THE RWANDA CRISIS AND CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: Seven Assumptions

**1) Assumption:** The key to the resolution of Rwanda's political problems is to be found in war crimes trials since justice is a necessary and reasonable prerequisite for reconciliation. Related to this is the assertion that war crimes trials are necessary in order to break the cycle of Hutu-Tutsi violence. This is apparent because the absence of any punitive response to the 1960's genocide in Rwanda was a precursor to the 1994 genocide<sup>4</sup>.

These views are assumed by many Westerners and also asserted by the current Rwandan government. However, the relationship between war crimes tribunals and reconciliation processes is debatable. The only other international tribunals attempted were after World War Two, and these had little to do with reconciliation between Germans and Jews, or Japanese and Chinese. Nor are there hard and fast indications that the Nuremberg trials are what made reconciliation in post-war western Europe possible. As with the International War Crimes Tribunal in Arusha, Tanzania, these trials set an important example for militaries which may be tempted to participate in future war crimes. These trials were also probably an important ritual for re-asserting the international moral order, as Alain Destexhe points out<sup>5</sup>. Finally, marking individuals as indicted war criminals also seems useful in the cases of Bosnia and Rwanda, as it makes it more difficult for labeled persons to make claims of political legitimacy. These issues, while important, have little to do with reconciliation or "righting" the situation so the survivors can re-establish congenial relations with other Rwandans who may or may not have participated in the genocide.

As relevant as the post-World War Two trials may be, there are also instances where rebuilding following mass murder and genocide-like crimes have occurred without trials. The Ugandan Ambassador to the United Nations in 1996 pointed out to the African Studies

Association that Uganda, Zimbabwe<sup>6</sup>, and post-Mau Mau Kenya are examples of countries where war crimes were committed and went unpunished, but nevertheless the "cycle of retribution" stopped. The Ambassador also made the point that South Africa is dealing with extremely sensitive reconciliation issues without appeals for mass arrests, tribunals, or support for a justice system which cannot possibly try all of the accused in a fair or just manner. Indeed, the legitimization of mass arrests in Rwanda on the basis of the genocide can easily be seen as an attempt by an authoritarian minority government to maintain control through terror or arbitrary arrest. Certainly, it is seen by the Hutu masses as having this effect<sup>7</sup>

Violence is not cyclical, except perhaps in the short-run, and often only in the context of politically-inspired legitimization processes. A quick look at the 20th century verifies this; Germany, France, and the United Kingdom are now allies, despite two world wars. No cycle of violence emerged following the dismantling of Soviet gulags. More recently, peace is emerging in places like Lebanon, El Salvador, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Indeed, there are examples of alliances and fights between ethnic groups, nations, and tribes which have formed and re-formed in different situations. There is nothing inherently "cyclical" about these processes, however. Neither is there a cycle of violence in Rwanda.

**2) Assumption:** The genocide was the consequence of poorly funded development programs: had money been invested in the region in the past, the crisis could have been avoided. Likewise, had money invested in the camps around Rwanda instead been spent in Rwanda, Rwanda itself would be in better shape.

Economic development is only part of the problem in Rwanda, and it is not the part directly causing genocide or war<sup>9</sup>. The poorest country in the region has been Tanzania, and that country has certainly avoided genocide, as well as political instability. Uganda has been better off economically than Rwanda and Tanzania; yet it also had a 15 year period of violence and political instability.

Thankfully, modern genocide is still not a common enough event to draw any generalizable assumptions about causation; the only other definitive cases are Nazi Germany and Ottoman Turkey in Armenia<sup>10</sup>. Neither of these countries suffered from the same type of poverty as there was in Rwanda. Reaching such a conclusion would even be difficult if cases of government-sanctioned mass murder (as opposed to genocide) were included in the mix, e.g. Pol Pot's Cambodia, Stalin's gulags, East Timor, and the 19th century American West. While the body counts may have been more or less than Rwanda, the proximate political, social, and economic situations were different. A similar consequence (mass murder or genocide) does not necessarily imply the same cause<sup>11</sup>.

**3) Assumption:** The Interhamwe (or armed elements) and refugees must be separated so that the refugees can voluntarily return to Rwanda<sup>12</sup>.

This dogma has been used for the last three years by the UNHCR to explain the failure of voluntary repatriation programs. Human Rights Watch says that the failure to separate ex-Rwandan military from the refugee population was due to simple "indifference" by the International community. More recently, Defense Minister Paul Kagame of Rwanda claimed that the inability of the UNHCR to separate refugees from Interhamwe was justification for

Rwandan military intervention in Congo/Zaire. From my perspective, these views show a lack of understanding for what refugees are and how social movements work.

No one person is either Interhamwe or not. In sociological terms, "Interhamwe" is not a discrete category. Rather there is an alienated Hutu population sympathetic to the young men, whatever they may call themselves, who mobilize and protect them in crisis situations. This population is sympathetic to these young men even though many are aware that some have committed genocide, and at times used brutal methods to control the Hutu population itself.

But not all former Interhamwe remain members of militias or paramilitary movements. Likewise, some members of current paramilitary movements were not members of Interhamwe militia in the early 1990's. Indeed, according to some accounts, some Interhamwe members probably joined the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) army which liberated Rwanda in 1994<sup>13</sup>. The important point is that militia groups are more likely to mobilize and achieve legitimacy in times of crisis, i.e. during flight, forced repatriations, military attacks, and asylum crises. This is why sociologists speak of how social movements "mobilize" people and identities. This stands in contrast to legalistic approaches which assign different people to discrete categories like "Interhamwe" and "refugee". In the case of Rwanda, impressions made during the brutal, unusual days of the April-July 1994 seem to dominate Western understanding of Hutu social movements. But such categorizations are not a very good basis for imputing motives or making predictions of how Hutu nationalist groups will behave in refugee camps in the former Zaire, Tanzania, Malawi, Angola, Kenya, or Gabon. They are also not a very good tool for understanding how Hutu militia groups interact with their families within these refugee camps. Indeed, using Interhamwe to understand the failure of voluntary repatriation reminds me of the Americans blaming Communist subversion in South Vietnam on "Charlie." It was a real phenomenon, but the caricature was so awkward that it was not a useful analytical tool.

Such status ambiguity also is why it is rarely possible to separate "legitimate refugees" from military in virtually every refugee situation. Refugee situations are by definition focused by both politics and crisis: running for one's life is by definition a crisis, and the very definition of "refugee" implies political alienation from one's home country. It is little wonder that the many gray areas surrounding claims to legitimate refugee status occupy a good portion of the UNHCR's legal and diplomatic staff around the world. Thus, from a sociological viewpoint, sympathy with paramilitary movements in refugee situations, while undesirable, are normal.

**4) Assumption:** There must be hundreds of thousands of murderers who assisted with the genocide, and it follows that this many must be punished if justice is to be done<sup>14</sup>.

Again, who is and is not a murderer is a legal interpretation. Genocide is an organized crime by a government against an ethnic group. But governments are not tried or put in prison; individuals are. One can speculate about how many individual "murderers" there are -- most guesses are based on the death toll and the means of execution (gangs of machete wielders). Estimates based on such logistics range from some tens of thousands to three million "murderers." These guesses while often logically sound, do not represent specific guilty persons in the legal sense<sup>15</sup>.

Thus, while the 100-120,000 people (mostly Hutu men) in jail represent a reasonable count given the scope of the genocide, without trial to legitimate their individual guilt as being greater

or different from those who were not arrested, the prisoners do not represent any sort of individual responsibility, but rather a collective one. Given the lack of clarity about who the collective is (is it all Hutu, people who fled to Zaire, civil servants of the former government, etc.) these 100-120,000 represent simply the power of arrest by the government, not a tool for identifying and punishing the guilty.

The problem of the basic legitimacy of the current RPF-led government compounds the issue further. The international community is in general agreement that the authoritarian RPF is better than anarchy and that the genocidal MRND has no role in Rwanda's future. This, however, is different from deeper issues of national legitimacy and nation-building. Tragically, the current government seems caught in a vicious cycle. It is perceived by the Hutu masses as an occupying force maintaining power through the use of arrest and intimidation. The jails, filled with people who are the sons, brothers, cousins, nephews, or fathers of most Rwandan Hutu, are a persistent reminder of this power. But, from the government's perspective, without the arrests and consequent intimidation, the Hutu masses may revolt against the minority government. Indeed the inability of the government to control the killing of genocide survivors seems to indicate that this result is occurring.

From the perspective of many Hutu, the arrests are only the most current and internationally obvious tool of Rwanda's authoritarian state. Many refugees point out that large numbers of Hutu died in the war, and continue to die without recourse to any system of justice. The lack of a visible response to the massacre by the military at Kibeho (4,000+ Hutu dead in April 1994), and the steady flow of execution victims in the Kagera River in 1994-5 are just two of the foci which cause Hutu to doubt the sincerity of the government<sup>16</sup>. Alain Destexhe has made the legal point that killing by the RPF is fundamentally different than genocide (he describes these killings by the legalistic term "exactions"). However, this legalistic distinction in international law is irrelevant to the 100-120,000 people in Rwanda's jails awaiting trial by weak Rwandan national courts which are part of the same political apparatus fighting Hutu militia groups in the country-side. I suspect that this legal distinction is also not clear to the Rwandan farmers, be they Hutu or Tutsi. As such, it does little to assist, and may exacerbate, the basic legitimacy problems of the RPF government.

**5) Assumption:** Repatriation of refugees to countries of origin is the only viable political solution.

Few refugee crises have been solved solely by repatriation. Most are solved by a combination of voluntary repatriation, local resettlement, and third country resettlement. Officially, only the Tanzanians have even discussed this fact (briefly in late 1994) with respect to the Great Lakes crisis. Meanwhile, the international actors continue to chase the elusive "voluntary repatriation only" policy which resulted in the chaotic and violent disintegration of the Zairian/Congolese camps, and the forced repatriation of almost 400,000 refugee from Tanzania to Rwanda.

Other refugee crises in the region (including the Rwandan crisis of the 1960's, Burundian of 1970s, and to a lesser extent the Mozambican crises of the 1980s) were resolved through combined programs of voluntary resettlement, along with local and third country resettlement. The Indo-chinese refugee situations of the 1980s were solved through a combination of second

and third country resettlement, voluntary repatriation, and in the end some forced repatriation. Premature repatriation to Afghanistan resulted in the emptying and refilling of camps in Pakistan. Post World War Two refugee policies in Europe also reflected a combination of second country resettlement, third country resettlement, voluntary repatriation, and forced repatriation.

Given these precedents, it is a good assumption that when the dust of Central Africa's wars has settled, Rwandans and Burundians will have been scattered across eastern and central Africa with the assistance of the international community. It is only a question of how much it will cost, and how many will die in the process.

**6) Assumption:** Intervention by an international military force could have disarmed the violent elements in the refugee populations<sup>17</sup>.

Disarmament would have involved enforcing a perimeter around the refugee concentrations, isolating all males, and then doing a systematic hut to hut search. Weapons would undoubtedly have been found. Given that the primary weapon, the machete, is also an agricultural tool, most weapons would necessarily be returned. Assuming that this was feasible, it would have done nothing towards enhancing the legitimacy of the RPF government in Kigali among the refugee populations. In fact it would have done just the opposite by intensifying refugee resentment toward the government and international community.

**7) Assumption.** There are no more Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, only Rwandans.

This is the official policy of the current Rwandan government. It is of course an appealing policy to pursue. However, stating that this is so does not necessarily make it so. Institutionalized discrimination based on any number of status markers (race, ethnic group, language skills, accent, economic status, etc.) are persistent all over the world, despite laws to the contrary. Indeed, virtually every country in the world does have a minority which study after study shows is discriminated against.

While the identities of Hutu and Tutsi are remarkably malleable<sup>18</sup>, there is an obvious warning for those who take their claims of ethnic homogeneity at face value<sup>19</sup>. In Burundi, a policy of "we are all Burundians" was maintained between the mass murder of Hutu there in 1972-3 until the present. In the process, unlike Rwanda, ethnic distinctions were eliminated from national identity cards; indeed for a number of years in the 1980s it was illegal to speak of Hutu and Tutsi in Burundi. These policies did not of course stop political parties from asserting a Hutu-Tutsi distinction in the 1990s.

## CAN ANALYTICAL DEPTH BE BROUGHT TO POLICY ANALYSIS IN COMPLEX EMERGENCIES?

I think that part of the problem with the "conventional wisdom" described above is rooted in the nature of emergency management. Three factors of emergency management make the type of over-generalizations described here more likely in emergencies than in other endeavors.

First is the speed with which emergencies happen. By definition, emergencies are uncommon events, and as a result considered to be unique, particularly by staff in remote field