

Lessons from a Personal Journey through the Genocide in Rwanda

Written by Mukesh Kapila

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Lessons from a Personal Journey through the Genocide in Rwanda

<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/05/15/lessons-from-a-personal-journey-through-the-genocide-in-rwanda/>

MUKESH KAPILA, MAY 15 2014

This article is part of an E-IR series marking the twentieth commemoration of the Rwandan Genocide.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. The theme of the official commemorations – *Kwibuka20* – asks the world to stand against genocide in three ways [1]:

- To remember by honouring the memory of those who died and offering support to those who survived
- To unite by reconciling through shared human values
- To renew by sharing our experiences and learning from others, to create a better world together

As I sat in Kigali's Amahoro Stadium on 7th April 2014 watching the official ceremony [2] unfold, the speeches of Rwandan President Kagame, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, and other world leaders were interrupted by the packed crowd: first a low wailing, and then lamentations as the families of genocide survivors vented their anguish. Red Cross volunteers stretchered away those who could bear no more.

My previous visit to that stadium had been in 1994 when it was hosting a few thousand of the luckier escapees from the genocide. I was an aid official of the UK Foreign Office's Overseas Development Administration (now Department for International Development). Then, the blood was still congealing down the walls of Kigali's Sainte-Famille Church and piles of rotting corpses littered the countryside as I witnessed the tail end of the 100 days of mass killings. That experience of the last genocide of the 20th century has haunted me ever since and shaped my life in every way, not least when, as Head of the United Nations in Sudan in 2003-04, I was confronted by Darfur, the first genocide of the 21st century.

It took me nearly 20 years to summon up the emotional courage to return to Rwanda. As I travelled around today's Rwanda seeing its extraordinary transformation, I reflected on the lessons to learn – not only from Rwanda but also from history beforehand and subsequent events.

Lesson #1: Genocide has unique characteristics and never comes out of the blue.

Rwanda re-confirmed what history had already taught us: genocide always appears to be a state act because only authorities have the organisational capacity necessary to achieve their desired end of the complete annihilation of a targeted group.

The testimonies of Rwandan killers and survivors confirm how easy it is for ordinary – usually decent – people to be converted into mass killers through systematic manipulation by their leaders in a three-stage process of *dehumanisation*, *distancing*, and *desensitisation*. This was described to me at first hand by inmates serving life sentences at Kigali Central Prison. Fostering social exclusion and hatred are always part of a genocidal strategy, as also explained graphically by the former announcer on the notorious *Radio Libre des Mille Collines*. I experienced this again ten years later when the Arab-dominated Sudanese government turned with genocidal intent onto its black African citizens in Darfur.

Lessons from a Personal Journey through the Genocide in Rwanda

Written by Mukesh Kapila

Despite genocide's unique signature, the conventional mantra is that we need yet more "early warning" of such events. This is simply an excuse to hide the reluctance to take "early action". The 1994 Rwandan genocide was preceded by "mini genocides" in every decade since the 1950s, allowing the organisers to practice and polish their methods while also testing and extending the world's tolerance limits. Hitler's Holocaust in Europe took place in the context of a century-long, progressively increasing anti-Semitism in Europe. The 2003/04 Darfur genocide was a refinement on the mass atrocities visited by the Sudan regime on its people of the Nuba Mountains during the 1990s. Currently, we are observing the gradual extinction of the Rohingya population in Myanmar/Burma.

The implication is that genocide is not simply the extreme end of a spectrum of conflict that afflicts so many communities worldwide and that sometimes inexplicably goes out of control. Violence is common while genocide is rare. It is a completely different level of evil behaviour that can arise in a susceptible society and that is fully explicable by its precursors and mechanics. It follows that genocide prevention is not simply a subset of conflict prevention as many policymakers assume.

The further implication is that incipient genocide is easy to recognise and there is plenty of generally available early warning. This is even more true nowadays in the internet age and with the advent of social media and citizen journalism. It follows that we do not need to expend yet more resources on setting up increasingly complex indicators and systems.

Lesson #2: Genocides are connected across time and distance, and leave a permanent legacy.

A visit to the Kigali Genocide Memorial [3] is a moving experience. The tour illustrates how the Rwandan genocide was a hugely organised and bureaucratic activity in which many people played small, but critical, roles. A visit to the Murambi Memorial, with its exhumed and well-preserved remains, shows vividly that each killing was unique in terms of its individual style, a realisation that is usually lost within the mind-numbing statistic of up to a million deaths.

However, it was only when I also visited the Memorial de la Shoah [4] in Paris that I wondered if the Rwandan genocidaires had learnt their practical craft from the Nazi collaborators in France. The latter memorial displays in minute detail the banal business processes of the genocide against the French Jews. Artefacts, such as identity cards, in the two memorials display a striking similarity, testifying to a transfer of ideas and even technology across five decades and 4,000 miles. The purification ideology of the Khmer Rouge genocidaires in Cambodia also echoes Nazi ideas, and Pol Pot studied in Paris too.

The implication of this lesson is that each time genocide happens somewhere, it creates a precedent, as well as a legacy, of refined ideas and methods that can be used elsewhere. A crime against humanity in one place is indeed a crime against all humanity everywhere. By extension, the legacy of how we react to genocide – or fail to do so – also has permanent wider consequence.

Lesson #3: "Never again" will happen "again and again".

Genocide has happened throughout human history – in all cultures and continents – from well before Raphael Lemkin [5] invented the word itself in 1944 under the shadow of the Holocaust. It has even been speculated that the disappearance of Neanderthal man was a genocidal act, and genocidal atrocities have been documented in various era going back at least 4,000 years.

In the modern era, Rwanda's repeated experiments with genocide have already been mentioned. Psychologists explain this [6] by postulating that the propensity to commit such gross evil is part of the normal human condition due to natural selection having left deep traces of such design in our evolutionary development. In short, genocidal intent can arise anywhere and at any time, and will find fatal expression given the right social and cultural circumstances that are also widely distributed.

The implication of this lesson is that an innate and long-established part of human experience is bound to be part of our permanent future. Thus, genocide will recur and to say "never again" is an empty slogan, or worse, it may create

Lessons from a Personal Journey through the Genocide in Rwanda

Written by Mukesh Kapila

false hopes that lull us into dangerous complacency.

Lesson #4: No genocidal regime is removed except through force.

It required the armed forces of the Rwandan Patriotic Front to stop the killing spree in 1994. In similar vein, the whole world went to war to be rid of Hitler. The Vietnamese intervention was crucial to end the genocidal regime of Pol Pot in Cambodia. The Tanzanian military intervention was essential to end Idi Amin's mass atrocities in Uganda, as were the military interventions by India in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), NATO in the former Yugoslavia where the Srebrenica genocide occurred, and the British in Sierra Leone.

The point here is not that the external military interventions were successful in bringing long-term peace and stability, and, indeed, several others, including Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, have been highly problematic. But on the specific matter of mass killings, the application of force has always been necessary to stop them.

This inevitability is driven by the logic of the mass killers. Once they have embarked on their bloody enterprise and are sucked deeper and deeper into the mire, they are obliged to go on killing, as the imperative of self-survival means that there is no going back for them. For the same reason, diplomacy has never dislodged a genocidal leader and, as the specific case of Rwanda at the UN showed in 1994, diplomatic negotiations may have prolonged the crisis by giving legitimacy to the genocidaires and buying them more time to progress their heinous crimes.

The implication of this lesson is that when genocide or mass atrocities are suspected, military action will be needed sooner or later, and the earlier we act, the better is the chance to save more people.

Lesson #5: External military intervention to stop genocide is always too late.

Genocides does not come out of the blue, but when it gets going, it happens very fast because the application of maximum shock is necessary for the perpetrators to succeed. However, mustering the necessary armed intervention takes time and, more so, if it is coming from the international community, it must first be debated among states – and eventually in the UN Security Council – to build consensus and justify intervention.

The trajectories of the killings in genocides from the time of the Holocaust to present day Darfur, including the Rwanda experience, show that perhaps upwards of two-thirds of the people who will eventually die will have been killed by the time external, armed protectors first arrive. And then it will take time for them to achieve control, during which period the killings may even get worse. All this is under the best-case scenario that the perpetrators allow access or that their resistance can be easily overcome. Furthermore, it is assumed that external intervention forces are always well trained, resourced, motivated, and disciplined to enforce peace without themselves becoming part of the problem. Almost all recent experiences of UN-managed or UN-sanctioned peacekeeping show that this is not the case. Furthermore, the longer the external intervention, the greater are the prospects for new instabilities being generated.

The implication of this lesson is a difficult dilemma. Whereas the previous lesson argues that only military force will dislodge a genocidal regime, this lesson concludes that an inevitably late, external military intervention will, at best, reduce the human impact of an ongoing pogrom of mass atrocities, and could generate new problems of its own making. This leads us to the next lesson.

Lesson #6: The destiny of a people is ultimately in their own hands and they have the supreme right to defend themselves when faced with existentialist threats.

The Tutsi of Rwanda survived as a people only because their own forces went on the offensive to save themselves. If they had waited for the world to react, they would have been annihilated. In fact, when the world walked away from Rwanda, it facilitated the work of the genocidaires. I understood this at first hand in 1994 at the site of the *Ecole Technique Officielle*, a secondary school on the outskirts of Kigali that was a UN peacekeeper base. Desperate people were lured there by the hope of protection. But when the peacekeepers were withdrawn, the 2,500 Tutsi that

Lessons from a Personal Journey through the Genocide in Rwanda

Written by Mukesh Kapila

had become concentrated were easily marched to slaughter nearby. Their mass grave can be visited today. Many of them would have survived if they had not believed in the false promise of international protection and had instead fled into the deeply forested countryside where the genocidaires would have found it much more difficult to round them up.

A comparable tragedy is unfolding in Darfur today, where the billion-dollar joint UN and African Union peacekeeping force (UNAMID) is largely impotent to stop the genocidal violence, but which, nevertheless, provides a convenient fig leaf for a world that is unwilling to tackle the underlying issues of accountability of the Sudan regime.

The right to live is the most fundamental of all human rights, and the implication of this lesson is that when people are faced with a threat to their very existence, they have the inalienable right to take all necessary measures to defend themselves. Earlier lessons have argued that timely salvation is unlikely to come from external interventions. Therefore, domestic, armed resistance to overthrow a tyranny that seeks to annihilate them is morally justified. The outside world can support this, at the very least, by not standing in the way of threatened peoples trying to save their own selves. The international community could do better still by supporting them directly or indirectly, by economic and arms sanctions against regimes that commit mass atrocities.

Lesson #7: Responsibility to act is ultimately a personal one for which individual duty-bearers must be held accountable.

Some of the earliest people I met in 1994 in Kigali were Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, who stayed all through the genocide and saved hundreds of children who were thrust at them by Tutsi parents who were about to be rushed to their own slaughter. When the Hutu militia demanded entry to take away the "children of the cockroaches", the diminutive Indian nuns, with nothing but their faith to protect them, barred the way. Their personal courage prevailed. Subsequently I met General Dallaire and Carl Wilkens, whose personal actions also saved thousands of people.

Earlier in London, as a mid-level British Government official with access to confidential diplomatic cables, I had tracked the correspondence around important world capitals and with the UK Mission in New York, who were relaying discussions at the UN Security Council. I learnt how the decision not to intervene was made by individuals in authority in the US, British, and other governments. Another individual whose stance on the issue was pivotal to the eventual, tragic outcome was Kofi Annan, UN Assistant General for Peacekeeping at that time. He also contributed to the failure to prevent the Srebrenica genocide in 1995. He acknowledged this himself [7], in the response to the UN enquiries into the two genocides, when he admitted that he could have personally done more. However, a decade later – by when Kofi Annan had been promoted to become UN Secretary General, and so my boss when I was head of the UN in Sudan – my pleas to help [8] to stop the Darfur genocide went unheeded by him.

The lesson I learnt is that it is not institutions that fail or succeed, but the individuals that work in them. Furthermore, the higher the individual is placed, the greater is the personal responsibility on them to do the right thing. The implication is that if individual duty bearers are not held to account for their neglect, there are no incentives for their successors to do their duty, and failures will recur.

Lesson #8: Lack of personal empathy is at the root of individual failure to act.

Why do otherwise good men and women with the duty to act actually do nothing or so little? I studied this when I interacted with both actors and bystanders while the Rwanda genocide unfolded in 1994, and again in Darfur in 2004. I encountered seven common alibis for inaction:

- Cynicism
- Denial
- Prevarication
- Caution
- Distraction

Lessons from a Personal Journey through the Genocide in Rwanda

Written by Mukesh Kapila

- Buck-passing
- Evasion of responsibility
- Helplessness

At their root is the gap in outlook and understanding, and thus lack of empathy, between those high officials charged with the responsibility to protect, and the weak and vulnerable who are reliant on them to do so. The implication of this lesson is a question: can empathy be taught or imbibed as a virtue to stimulate the will to act?

Lesson #9: A new humanitarianism is needed.

With the failure of the political and military tracks to stop the Rwanda genocide, the mantle “to do something” passed to the humanitarians. That is why I found myself in Rwanda in July 1994, including being present in Goma in neighbouring Zaire (now DRC) on the day one million people fled and a catastrophic cholera epidemic erupted to kill thousands of refugees.

Back then, the humanitarian sector was in bad shape. With no preparedness, ineffectual coordination, and competition for the flood of donor resources thrown at them, the unprofessional and irresponsible behaviour of some agencies undoubtedly caused unnecessary loss of life. Added to this were ongoing security and access challenges, and the dilemma of what to do about separating the killers from the majority of innocent refugees. This led to accusations that the humanitarians were feeding the genocidaires. That charge was not helped by the French government’s *Operation Turquoise* (to which I was attached, much to my shame, as UK government liaison for a while) in southwest Rwanda. Its nominally humanitarian protection mandate, cynically endorsed by the UN, was actually a cover for the mass murderers to escape the advancing RPF.

The subsequent massive and highly critical Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda [9] stimulated much soul-searching that led to many new initiatives in which I was closely involved from my vantage point as Head of Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs in the British government’s new Department for International Development (DFID). These were concerned with establishing norms and standards, providing training, encouraging contingency planning, and strengthening coordination and accountability among humanitarian actors.

Undoubtedly, the shock of Rwanda triggered the search for a better way to deal with human suffering. Progress has been made. But with that have come new problems as the humanitarian business has grown in size and scope; but has it now lost its spirit [10]? The implication of this lesson is to ask how well humanitarians would respond to a new Rwanda-like situation. Experiences from contemporary Syria, Sudan, and South Sudan are not reassuring. The development of a new humanitarianism, fully fit for today’s purpose, is some way off.

Lesson #10: Post-genocidal societies need special consideration and there is no peace without justice.

Travelling through modern Rwanda demonstrates its remarkable turnaround. Enjoying a consistent annual economic growth rate of 8% – exceeding Asian countries – Africa’s most densely populated country can feed itself and, unlike most other countries, it has reduced its inequalities, especially in gender. It has used well the large quantities of aid provided by guilt-ridden donors. It spends over 40% of its budget on health and education, life expectancy has doubled within a generation, acute malnutrition is largely eliminated, infant mortality has plummeted, and 97% of its children are at school. With no natural resources of its own, it is fast turning itself into a knowledge-based economy with heavy investment in broadband connectivity. The streets are safe and corruption is negligible.

Will economic and social development ensure that genocide does not recur in Rwanda? The question is important because history suggests that the biggest risk factor for genocide occurring is a previous history of genocide. However, there is little evidence from elsewhere to suggest that poverty is a direct causal factor in genocide. That being said, poverty does lead to marginalization and exclusion, which are known risks. The Rwandan government has taken strong measures to outlaw speech that creates ethnic divisions and adopted other policy measures to promote reconciliation, healing, and social inclusion. However, can deeply embedded social attitudes be changed by top-down dictate? Only time will tell.

Lessons from a Personal Journey through the Genocide in Rwanda

Written by Mukesh Kapila

Complementing the development track, Rwanda has given prominence to bringing accountability and justice on the scale necessary for nationwide transformation. While the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda was essential to counter high-level impunity, it was the wholesale delivery of justice closest to the victim that has been crucial. The decentralised *gacaca* courts handled nearly 2 million cases of genocide allegations and tried some 1 million individuals in the process. Dubbed “mass justice for mass atrocities”, the system had its critics, but overall moved the country on at an unprecedented pace towards reconciliation.

The implication from the Rwanda experiment is that, in a society recovering from such immense collective trauma, governments need to lead by design rather than to rely on traditional bottom-up approaches. Even though many former genocidaires remain unconvinced and some remain in denial, they have retreated. The re-setting of social norms by executive fiat may eventually lead to a permanent shift in attitudes and behaviour, especially when a generation passes. Furthermore, although the building of democratic governance is a bulwark for the future, one size does not fit all and the last thing that a post-genocidal nation needs is divisive politics in the traditional western style of democracy that is often pushed by donors.

Lesson #11: International frameworks for protection and prevention need reform.

The Genocide Convention was adopted at the UN in 1948 in the aftermath of the Holocaust. But it was enforced for the first time in 1998, when the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda found a town mayor, and then the interim prime minister, to be guilty of genocide. While this was historic, the Genocide Convention has failed to prevent or deter any genocide because its definitions and provisions are difficult to prove and apply until the crime has obviously occurred. Therefore, a modernisation of the convention, with a presumption to act to prevent, is long overdue.

One legal innovation would be to evolve international law to hold high officials of international organisations accountable for failing to do their duty (see Lesson #8). Countering the impunity of bystanders may have as strong an impact as tackling the impunity of perpetrators.

The Rwanda experience also stimulated the emergence of the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in 2005. The new norm was an important declaration of intent that the world would not tolerate heinous crimes against humanity. But, in practice, and although it has spawned a large advocacy industry, it is difficult to find convincing cases where R2P has been instrumental in success. Is the glacial pace of R2P development helping or hindering the search for more robust and predictable solutions to prevent crimes against humanity, including genocide?

However, the key lesson from the international failure on Rwanda is that the ultimate custodian of our trust – the Security Council – failed the most vulnerable people on the planet in their hour of greatest need. Of course, that was a combination of the failure of several individual member states, each for their own reasons. The protagonists of R2P have made a good suggestion that the permanent members of the Security Council should voluntarily eschew their veto in relation to grievous crimes against humanity. A hopeful precedent was established when China and United States did not veto referral of the Darfur case to the International Criminal Court. However, more recently, the Security Council has been paralysed over Syria.

The implication of this lesson is that although the experiences of previous genocides, including Rwanda, have undoubtedly led to the creation of stronger norms, their effect, through international legal and structural arrangements, remains something of a lottery for those who are at greatest risk of becoming the victims of crimes against humanity.

Lesson #12: Remembrance and independent thinking are crucial to resisting genocide.

The earlier Lesson #3 concluded that “never again” cannot be guaranteed, and Lessons #7 and #8 shed light on the human reasons why we consistently fail. Although Lesson #9 ventured that we are getting better at alleviating human suffering, Lessons #2 and #10 suggested that each time a genocide occurs somewhere in the world, it leaves a permanent global legacy. Furthermore, once genocide has happened, Lesson #4 argued that armed force is needed to stop it, but Lesson #5 showed that external military intervention is always too late. Thus Lesson #7 opined that the

Lessons from a Personal Journey through the Genocide in Rwanda

Written by Mukesh Kapila

only recourse for threatened peoples is to resist by their own efforts as best as they can. Lesson #11 suggested improvements to the international framework that could strengthen the protection of vulnerable populations. However, the prospects for reform remain uncertain.

What, then, can we really say about reducing the risks for the occurrence of genocide? The starting point here is to recall that genocide is an act commissioned and executed by individuals, even if it is perpetrated against groups. Such evil starts in the hearts and minds of people, and that is where it must be stopped.

Travelling through Rwanda – in 1994 and in 2014 – has impressed me on the need for two crucial measures.

- *First*, to ensure that the truth of what happened in previous genocides is fully revealed so that all excuses are quashed, revisionism is robustly countered, and we remember well because if we do not, we are doomed to repeat the past.
- *Second*, to build societies that consist of individuals who are capable of independent thought so that they can resist the evil blandishments of genocidal leaders that can emerge at any time in any place.

In conclusion, the best way to honour those whom we failed in Rwanda twenty years ago is to learn the right lessons and apply them today with greater resolve. Our work is cut out, for example, in Sudan, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Syria, and Myanmar, to name just a few of the places where specific groups struggle at the margins of existence.

[1] Kwibuka20. <http://www.kwibuka.rw>

[2] Kwibuka20 commemoration at the Amohoro Stadium on 7th April 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDamCu0dD1Y>

[3] Kigali Memorial Centre. <http://www.kigaligenocidememorial.org/old/index.html>

[4] Memorial de la Shoah, Paris. <http://www.memorialdelashoah.org/index.php/en/>

[5] Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation – Analysis of Government – Proposals for Redress* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944), p. 79-95. Accessed at <http://www.preventgenocide.org/lemkin/AxisRule1944-1.htm>

[6] James Waller, "Perpetrators of Genocide: An Explanatory Model of Extraordinary Human Evil", *Journal of Hate Studies*, 2002. Accessed at <https://journals.gonzaga.edu/index.php/johs/article/view/3>

[7] BBC News. "UN Chief's Rwanda genocide regret", 2004. Accessed at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3573229.stm>

[8] Mukesh Kapila. *Against A Tide of Evil*, Mainstream Publishing, 2013. Accessed at <http://www.mukeshkapila.org>

[9] John Borton. "The Joint evaluation of emergency assistance to Rwanda". Accessed at <http://www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-26/the-joint-evaluation-of-emergency-assistance-to-rwanda>

[10] Mukesh Kapila. "Whither humanitarianism", 2014. Accessed at <http://www.odihpn.org/the-humanitarian-space/news/announcements/blog-articles/whither-humanitarianism-reflections-on-world-red-cross-red-crescent-day>

About the author:

Lessons from a Personal Journey through the Genocide in Rwanda

Written by Mukesh Kapila

Mukesh Kapila CBE is Professor Emeritus of Global Health and Humanitarian Affairs at the University of Manchester. He is a former Director at the World Health Organization and the United Nations.