The Rwandan Genocide

In the spring of 1994, the world watched as violence engulfed the tiny central African country of Rwanda. Over the course of one hundred days, nearly one million people were killed at the hands of army militias, friends, family members, and neighbors. In a country that had a total population of fewer than eight million, these numbers are mind-boggling. In a world that had pledged “never again,” the reality seemed instead to be “again and again.”

What are the origins of the Tutsi-Hutu conflict?

The hostility between Hutus and Tutsis, however intense, reaches back only a few decades. Although a minority, making up approximately 15 percent of the population, the Tutsis have long held most of the land in Rwanda (and neighboring Burundi). For centuries, they were primarily cattle herders while the Hutus, making up 84 percent of the population, were farmers. (The Twa people comprise the remaining 1 percent of the population.) Under German and then Belgian colonial rule, the economic differences between the two groups deepened. The Belgians openly favored the Tutsis. Educational privileges and government jobs were reserved solely for the Tutsis. Identity cards were issued to document ethnicity. (These types of cards were later used to identify the Tutsi during the 1994 genocide.) This colonial favoritism contributed to tensions between the Hutus and Tutsis.

Despite the growing tensions, widespread violence did not break out between the two groups until the country gained independence in 1962 as Rwanda-Urundi. (The country later split into the nations of Rwanda and Burundi.) In the late 1950s, the Belgians hastily organized elections in Rwanda and Burundi as their colonial empire in central Africa began to crumble. Hutu parties gained control of the
Rwandan government in 1959, reversing the power structure and triggering armed opposition by the Tutsis. In three years of civil war, fifty thousand Rwandans were killed and another one hundred thousand (almost all Tutsi) fled the country. In neighboring Burundi, the Tutsis took advantage of their control of the army to override election results and seize political power. During the next three decades, Burundi’s Tutsi-led government crushed repeated Hutu uprisings. In 1972 as many as one hundred thousand Hutus were killed in Burundi.

Ethnic conflicts notwithstanding, the vast majority of Hutus and Tutsis struggled side by side for survival as small farmers. By 1994, Rwanda, with a population of 8.4 million people and a land area the size of Maryland, was among the world’s most densely populated and poorest nations. Poverty and the scarcity of land played into the hands of politicians seeking to further their power by igniting ethnic tensions.

**What events led to the Rwandan Genocide?**

In 1990, the region’s problems were further complicated by the invasion of Rwanda by the rebel army, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Most of the soldiers in the RPF were Tutsi refugees who had been living in neighboring Uganda since the early 1960s. In August 1993, the Arusha Accords peace agreement between the rebels and the government was signed in Tanzania and a small UN force was put in place to oversee the accord.

Events in Burundi, however, soon reignited tensions. In October 1993, Tutsi army officers killed Burundi’s first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, in an attempt to overthrow the new government. Burundi plunged into violence. As many as one hundred thousand people, most of them Hutu, were killed.

Hutu extremists in Rwanda used the Burundi crisis as an opportunity to fan hostility against Tutsis in their country. In April 1994, Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana was killed in a suspicious plane crash, along with the second president of Burundi. Within hours of the crash, Hutu extremists executed eleven UN peacekeepers from Belgium and began carrying out a well-organized series of massacres. After the murder of the Belgians, the UN peacekeeping mission in Rwanda was brought to an abrupt halt as nearly every UN soldier was evacuated at the demand of their individual countries.

**How was the genocide carried out?**

The Rwandan Genocide lasted for one hundred days. Nearly one million people were killed in this time. Machetes and clubs were the most widely used weapons. Thousands of Tutsis and moderate Hutus were hacked to death each day by Hutus, many of them friends, neighbors, and relatives. Civilian death squads called *Interhamwe*, or “those who fight together” had trained prior to the start of the genocide and were responsible for the largest massacres. The majority of other
Hutus were given machetes and incited over the radio to kill. Told that the Tutsis would destroy Rwanda and kill all of the Hutus, the Hutus were made to believe that they had to kill the Tutsis first. Hutus who refused to kill or who attempted to hide Tutsis were killed as well. The largest massacres occurred in areas where Tutsis had gathered together for protection, such as churches, schools, and abandoned UN posts.

Radio played an integral role in the genocide. A nation crazed with fear and desperation heard repeated broadcasts labeling the Tutsis as “cockroaches” and “devils.” Loudspeakers in the streets disclosed names and locations of Tutsis on the run. The United States, the only country in the world with the technical ability to jam this hate radio, refused, stating that it was too expensive and would be against people’s right to free speech.

**How did the international community respond?**

Prior to the start of the genocide, the United States and the United Nations both disregarded warnings they received from Rwandans as well as from General Romeo Dallaire, head of the UN peacekeeping mission in Rwanda. These warnings clearly stated that a plan to exterminate the Tutsis was underway. Dallaire made an urgent request to be granted permission to raid the Hutu weapons caches. He was denied permission on the grounds that it was too dangerous, unprecedented, and against his mandate. He was instructed to inform the Hutu leaders that a genocide was about to begin. As the organizers of the genocide, these Hutu leaders were already well aware of this.

Once actual killing broke out, world leaders condemned the violence in Rwanda, but balked at intervening to stop it. U.S. officials in the Clinton administration refused to define the killings as “genocide,” in part because they did not want to be obligated to intervene under the Genocide Convention. Even as the rivers filled with corpses and the streets were lined with severed limbs, the international community did not intervene. Many characterized the conflict as “ancient ethnic hatred” and saw the risk of intervention as too high.

Eventually, the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) stepped up its assault against the government and the massacres came to a halt. By July 1994, the RPF had seized the capital and forced the Hutu army to flee in panic. Fearful of reprisals, as many as two million Hutus abandoned their homes, many taking refuge in the Congo. International forces, including two thousand American troops, ar-

![Rwandan children who lost their parents in the genocide rest at a camp in Goma.](image-url)
rived after the massacres had ended to protect international relief operations for the nearly two million Hutu refugees, including many of the killers. The last UN peacekeepers left Rwanda in early 1996.

**Why did the international community fail to intervene?**

In the years since the Rwandan Genocide, diplomats and scholars have debated why the international system failed Rwanda’s victims. The reasons remain unclear. State sovereignty, apathy, financial restraints, bureaucracy, fear, safety concerns, and “Somalia Syndrome” are among them. In 1998, while visiting Rwanda, President Clinton apologized for his administration’s part in disregarding the events of 1994.

“The international community, together with nations in Africa, must bear its share of responsibility for this tragedy, as well. We did not act quickly enough after the killing began. We should not have allowed the refugee camps to become safe havens for the killers. We did not immediately call these crimes by their rightful name: genocide. We cannot change the past. But we can...and must do everything in our power to help you build a future without fear, and full of hope.”

—President Bill Clinton in Rwanda, 1998

Despite President Clinton’s apology and the apologies of others, the United States and other nations have done little to address the deeper causes of one of the world’s bloodiest and most explosive conflicts. Progress has been made in preventing a new round of bloodletting between Tutsis and Hutus, but some worry that the international community is not doing all that it should. The country, with its fragile stability and complicated past, could easily explode into violence again, as could neighboring Burundi.

“If it were to happen again tomorrow, would the international community be there? Quite honestly, I don’t know.”

—UN Secretary General Kofi Annan

**How is Rwanda recovering from the genocide?**

Rwanda’s government has taken steps to heal the wounds of Tutsi-Hutu conflict within Rwanda. Almost all of the Hutu refugees have returned home. Local and national elections...in defense of some 1.5 million Kurds in April 1991 from the total passivity in responding to the Rwandan bloodbath during which perhaps a million people were murdered in April 1994. In between, there was Somalia.”

—Scholar Thomas G. Weiss

**Somalia Syndrome**

In 1993, U.S. troops stationed in Mogadishu, Somalia on a humanitarian mission were involved in a clash with Somali militia. The firefight that ensued on October 3, 1993 was the bloodiest firefight involving U.S. troops since Vietnam. The conflict resulted in eighteen dead Americans and nearly one thousand dead Somalis. The American troops were killed and dragged through the streets of the capital city of Mogadishu. Broadcast for the world to see, the American public was outraged. All American peacekeeping troops in Somalia were removed as the country slipped into chaos. This battle changed America’s responses to the world’s humanitarian crises, especially those in Africa. America’s reluctance to get involved in certain conflicts, often those involving ethnic strife, is commonly referred to as the “Somalia Syndrome.”
have been held and both Hutus and Tutsis fill top government positions. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (in Arusha, Tanzania) has tried more than fifty of the top organizers of the genocide, though there are currently thousands of suspects still awaiting justice, and many others at large. In 2005 the government released about half of its prisoners, many of whom had already served the maximum sentence for their alleged crimes. Over thirty thousand accused remain in jail.

A local, traditional justice system known as Gacaca (pronounced ga-cha-cha) is trying to bring justice and healing to the remaining victims and perpetrators. These courts try lower-level participants in the genocide, and have sentenced over thirteen hundred people so far. Some Rwandans say they have been threatened from testifying in these courts.

Memories of the 1994 genocide remain fresh, though the government says its promotion of national unity is working. Countless Hutus and Tutsi live as displaced persons or refugees. Intermarriage and close friendships between Tutsis and Hutus are no longer as common as they once were. Moreover, Rwanda’s poverty, which has worsened since 1994, threatens to touch off further ethnic conflict. Regional instability and the massive refugee problem in the African Great Lakes Region are additional factors that threaten stability in Rwanda.

"Rwanda has a problem. On the surface, things are becoming normal. But some of the flowers which are flowering have bodies beneath them."

—Esther Mujaway, Rwandan counselor

The case studies discussed in this reading represent only some of the genocides that have scarred the twentieth century. The frequency with which genocides have occurred in the past suggests that the world will see more cases of genocide in the future. In the coming days you will have an opportunity to consider a range of alternatives for U.S. policy on this issue. Each of the four viewpoints, or options, that you will explore is based in a distinct set of values or beliefs. Each takes a different perspective on our country’s role in the world and our relationship with the UN. You should think of the options as a tool designed to help you understand the contrasting strategies from which Americans must craft future policy.

At the end of this unit, you will be asked to make your own choices about where U.S. policy should be heading. In doing so, you may borrow heavily from one option, combine ideas from several, or take a new approach altogether. You will need to weigh the risks and trade-offs of whatever you decide.