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Revisiting the Rwandan Genocide: Reflections on the French-led Humanitarian Intervention

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Abstract

Humanitarian intervention is a controversial issue in international relations and it is imperative for policy makers to understand its nature and complexities. This article seeks to explain France's humanitarian actions during the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and how they were used to protect its strategic interests in Africa and Rwanda. Retrospectively analyzing the actions of France during the Rwandan genocide would provide invaluable insights on how powerful states advance their selfish national interests under the guise of humanitarianism. France's military intervention in Rwanda represented the attempt to weave its strategic interests with its duty under international law to respond in cases of genocide and serious violations of human rights. The descriptive analysis method is used to build the arguments of this article and the conclusion reveals that France's actions of leading the humanitarian intervention during the Rwandan genocide were not manifestations of a benevolent foreign policy but the pursuit of its selfish goals.

Keywords: France, Rwanda, Humanitarian Intervention, Genocide, Strategic Interests.

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1. Introduction

The humanitarian intervention by France during the 1994 Rwandan genocide has remained controversial not only on its effectiveness but also on its motivations in helping put an end to the largest human slaughter in the post-Cold War era. France's intervention has been a thorny issue even in contemporary Rwanda resulting in frosty relations between the two countries. Rwanda's current leader Paul Kagame had blamed France as a co-conspirator of the bloodiest modern purge in Africa (Penketh,2014).

The Rwandan genocide was the culmination of decades of ethnic conflict promoted and perpetrated by colonial powers Germany and Belgium. The mass slaughter of the Tutsi minorities which occurred from April until July 1994 were orchestrated by the Hutu-led government with the support of the militia group Interahamwe. It is considered as the bloodiest mass killings since the Holocaust with the "fastest genocide rate in recorded history" (Kuperman,2000:98). Prunier (1995:261) claimed that the "daily killing rate was at least five times that of Nazi death camps". According to one estimate, the genocide had resulted into the deaths of between "6 and 11 per cent of the whole Rwandan population and more than half of Rwanda's Tutsi population" (Destexhe,1995:15). The United Nations (1999i) had officially concluded that the genocide claimed the lives of eight hundred thousand people.

The offer of France to lead the military mission Operation Turquoise in Rwanda was the only option for the United Nations after months of failing to muster enough military forces and funding for an expanded UN military operation. But the decision of France to intervene in Rwanda came too late when the genocide was almost over. This raises serious doubts on the real intentions of France on its willingness to take risks in sending its troops when other major powers refused to do so. This article identifies and discusses the specific actions that France had taken during the genocide especially in its offer of leading the UN-sanctioned military operations. Humanitarian interventions can only be objectively discussed through a retrospective analysis of their nature and their complexities are best understood by examining the different facets of their creation. Competing various narratives on humanitarian intervention provide a wider lens in understanding the true nature of this divisive issue in global affairs. The French-led humanitarian intervention in Rwanda remains controversial that

it needs to be viewed from different perspectives. The objective of this article is to contextualize France's actions during the Rwandan genocide on its strategic interests in Africa and Rwanda. Retrospectively analyzing the actions of France would provide invaluable insights on how powerful states advanced their selfish agenda under the guise of humanitarianism.

2. Methodology

The descriptive analysis method in research is used in building the arguments of this article on the actions of France during the genocide especially on its leadership of the humanitarian intervention. Official reports and documents from the United Nations and other international organizations were accessed and analysed. Journal articles, books, and other sources were utilized as well to provide a coherent explanation that provides the foundational relevance of the arguments presented in this article.

3. Theoretical Framework

International relations is a narrative of the quest for power and survival. Realism views the act of humanitarianism by states not from a moral perspective but the standpoint of power and national interests. For Morgenthau (1967), the decisions of states when and how to intervene are dependent on the national interests involved. The consideration of self-interest in the calculation whether to intervene or not, even in cases of mass killings such as genocide, is a presumed regularity in political decisions because states are often reluctant to make sacrifices for the welfare of people other than its citizens. Humanitarian interventions are undertaken by states after carefully weighing the costs and benefits of sending their troops to foreign lands because political decisions are rationally conceived based on practical necessities and rarely on morality. Compassion for humanity could be resorted to by states if it serves the greater national interest. Humanitarian intervention is bound to occur if the rationale behind it is anchored on selfish benefits (Aliyev,2011).

Waltz viewed the international system as the hierarchical ordering of states based on their relative power to influence the system (Waltz,1979). This structure compels states within the system to seek and maximize their powers as a means to survive and they perform deliberately conceived strategies to accumulate and increase their capabilities. There are times when major players in the system are expected to address international

interests and to do "what is necessary for the world's survival" but because of the existence of the condition of self-help, "states have to do whatever they think necessary for their own preservation" (Waltz,1979:109). The result is the subordination of the international to the national interests. Morgenthau argued that "intervene we must where our national interests require it and where power gives us the chance to succeed" and that the choice to do so is predicated "by a careful calculation of the interests involved and the power available" (Morgenthau,1967:435). This idea of strategic humanitarianism compellingly summarizes the notion of self-help and national interests that embody the realist perspective of global politics by providing a logical explanation on why states decide to play the role of heroes of mercy during times of humanitarian emergencies.

4. Literature Review

4.1. Roots of the Genocide

Rwanda, during the genocide in 1994, was a country segregated along ethnic lines comprising the Hutus as the dominant group and the minority Tutsis. These two groups had, for centuries, lived in cultural and ethnic homogeneity until the arrival of their European colonizers. Newbury (1998) noted that "past conflict in Rwanda was more often between dynasties of the same ethnic group than between different ethnic groups". The division of Rwandans into different ethnic groups was a result of the colonial policies of the two European powers, Germany and Belgium, which successively colonized the country in the late 1800s until its independence in 1962.

The colonial powers treated the two groups as different races by "relegating the vast majority of Hutus to particularly onerous forms of forced cultivation and by actively favoring Tutsi in access to administrative posts, education, and jobs" and this policy provided the perfect foundation for the genocide (Newbury,1995:12). This practice resulted in animosity between the groups shattering the peaceful coexistence that had existed for centuries. Belgium effectively controlled the country by favoring the Tutsis but by 1950s it switched side to favor the majority Hutus after the Tutsis strongly advocated for the country's independence.

In the waning days of Belgian rule, most of the businesses in Rwanda belonged to the Tutsis as well as the key positions in the government. Thus, when independence was granted in 1962, the majority Hutus considered it as some sort of a double liberation from their "Belgian foreign masters" and

the "ruling Tutsis". The ascension to power of the Hutus was marked by a bloody carnage resulting in thousands of Tutsis killed and an exodus of refugees to neighboring countries. In the years that followed, the Tutsis organized a rebel group, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which launched several attacks against the Hutu government in a bid to regain power and reestablished their status in the country. In the 1990 Rwandan civil war, the RPF had almost toppled the Habyarimana regime if not for the intervention of France. In 1994 it had successfully taken control of Rwanda.

4.2. French strategic interests in Africa and Rwanda 1960-1994

Africa is the only part of the world where France yields enormous influence. Francophone African states, since their independence from France in the 1960s until 1994, had played an important role in French foreign policy by being the chosen arena where Paris can project its capabilities and became "an exclusive sphere of influence on which to base its claims of grandeur and great power status" (Gregory,2000). Identifying the strategic interests of France in Africa and Rwanda is crucial in understanding why France had to spend blood and treasure to lead the humanitarian intervention during the genocide. France's strategic interests in Africa could be summed up in three distinct areas:

1.**Cultural**: The French language and culture have been considered as emblematic of France's prestige and grandeur. French, spoken by 29 countries in Africa, is an important cornerstone in building familylike relations between France and its former African colonies. The dispersion of the French language and culture had enabled France to be entrenched deeply within the Francophone African psyche enabling the building of intimate connection between Paris and various African capitals. The goal of making France and Africa as a single geopolitical unit necessitated the cultural diffusion containing elements of French policy and ideology. Successive French governments had ensured the deep entrenchment of the French language and culture in the various societies of its former colonies and countries where it had exercised significant leverage. France knew that these cultural ties must be preserved and protected if it were to maintain its power and influence in these African states.

2.**Political**: the granting of independence to its former colonies did not result in the complete withdrawal of France from Africa but through a series of defense, economic and cultural agreements, it was able to continue its

influential role in African affairs. It had been the policy of different French governments to support African leaders who were staunchly loyal to France regardless of their leadership style and governance record on corruption and human rights abuses. The presence of French military forces on African soil had been a constant fixture in the post-colonial Africa and France did not hide its proclivity to militarily intervene in various occasions under the pretext of protecting allied governments besieged by opposition rebel forces. France had concluded eight defense and 24 military agreements and intervened at least 30 times in Africa from 1963 until the early 1990s (Martin,1995). Different African despots and dictators had remained in power through the political lifeline that France had extended in the form of development aid, military transfer of arms and weaponry and preferential trading (Staunton,2016). The close bond between France and its former colonies had provided Paris with the prestige of being considered a major power through the support given by these African states in various international forum and organizations when French interests needed to be supported and defended. It has always been to the best interest of France that these Francophone countries in Africa had to remain under its influence to sustain its status as a key player in global affairs.

3.**Economic**: Francophone Africa had been an important economic partner for France as a market for French products and investments. It had also been a strategic source of raw materials and minerals for France's various industries. One writer observed that the cooperation and defense agreements signed by France and its former colonies had contained "special provisions concerning French exclusive access to such strategic raw materials" (Martin, 1995). In 1993, France had a negative balance of trade with other regions in the world but not so with Africa, its third main export market, where it gained a positive trade balance of US$ 491 million and a profit of US$ 8 billion for French companies (Ager,1996; Ibid).

French strategic interests in Rwanda were more political and cultural rather than economic. Since the establishment of closer Franco-Rwandan relations in 1975 after the signing of a military agreement, France became the main supplier of military weapons and equipment and was the main provider of development aid to Rwanda. President Juvenal Habyarimana was considered by Paris as a loyal ally that during the 1990 civil war the French military intervened to provide crucial support enabling the government to

defeat the RPF. The fact that the rebel forces operated from neighboring Uganda, considered part of anglophone countries in Africa, made France wary and suspicious. France had been highly skeptical of American interests in Africa that in its view, the region cannot be left in the hands of leaders who are "completely aligned to American views and interests" (Prunier,1997). France had portrayed the Tutsi rebels as Anglophones by speaking English instead of French (Wallis,2006). This cultural interpretation of the Rwandan civil war had extended up to the genocide three years later when France launched Operation Turquoise to ostensibly protect the Rwandan population from genocide. It is believed that France decided to lead the humanitarian intervention not because of moralistic concerns but to save its Hutu allies from the anglophone invaders and "make sure that the Hutu regime would be represented in the new government" (Staunton,2016). France knew that any Tutsi-led government that would be constituted after the genocide would need the support of the Hutu majority and as long as it maintained close relations with the Hutus then it could maintain its influence in Rwanda.

5. Findings and Analysis

This section will present and analyzed the different actions taken by France during the genocide that will provide the context on how the French government endeavored to protect its strategic interests in Rwanda and Africa.

5.1. Pushing for a Ceasefire

The UN Security Council, during the height of the genocide, had decided that UN forces in Rwanda under the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) were to be downsized and pulled out from the country because their security could not be guaranteed (Security Council,1994a). From the start of the genocide, France had spearheaded the call in the Security Council for a ceasefire by insisting that the Hutu-led government and the RPF rebel group must agree to a cessation of hostilities. France warned that a victory of any of the two parties would be catastrophic for the country as it would lead to prolonged violence (Security Council,1994b). It repeated the same demand for a ceasefire in the subsequent sessions of the Security Council's discussions of the grave situation in Rwanda (Security Council, 1994c; Security Council,1994d). Throughout the debates in the Security Council, France maintained its disdain for a military solution and

reiterated the need to conclude a ceasefire agreement and resume political dialogue. It was highly questionable for France to insist for a ceasefire given its close relationship with the Hutu-led government and its role in training and equipping the Rwandan government forces.

Why would France strongly advocate for a ceasefire and not a military intervention? France had insisted that a ceasefire would prevent more bloodshed but the realities in Rwanda had revealed a starkly different scenario. The RPF was already on the verge of controlling the whole country and had gained major victories in its tactical offensives against the Rwandan military. The rebel forces had captured several Hutu strongholds including the capital Kigali causing the Hutu government to flee southwest of the country. The establishment of a ceasefire would have put a halt to the gains of the RPF and could have provided the losing government forces a breathing space that would allow them to regroup and mount a consolidated resistance. The Czech Ambassador to the UN pointedly said that this French demand for a cessation of hostilities was "like wanting Hitler to reach a ceasefire with the Jews" (National Security Archive,2014). Moreover, any ceasefire agreement could have resulted in the preservation of the status quo giving the genocidal government a role and leverage in any future political negotiation.

5.2. Playing the Hero Role

The French policy of non-involvement on any military action in Rwanda was quickly reversed by the first week of June. In a cable to the UN dated June 15, the French government hinted on its preparations for a unilateral military operation. In its further communication with the UN, France had indicated its effort of exploring other alternatives to stop the killings in Rwanda and made known its readiness to intervene if the killings would continue (Kroslak,2008). On June 22, France requested a Security Council meeting seeking approval and authorization for its planned humanitarian intervention in Rwanda and thereafter Security Council Resolution 929 was adopted authorizing France to lead the military operations under a stronger Chapter VII mandate (Security Council,1994f). The French ambassador claimed that "the goal of the French initiative is exclusively humanitarian" and intended only to "rescue endangered civilians and put an end to the massacres, and to do so in an impartial manner" (Security Council,1994g).

The offer of France to lead a humanitarian intervention was the only option

that the UN had received after weeks of soliciting financial support and troop commitments on the planned expansion of UNAMIR to UNAMIR II. Major powers in the Security Council the US, Russia, UK and China-showed no concrete move to militarily support and contribute to the planned intervention in Rwanda owing to the absence of compelling national interests on their part. The United Kingdom, the only other major power with a noticeable presence in Africa, was noncommittal to providing armed troops and funding support for the expanded UNAMIR given that Rwanda has no strategic value. When France finally entered Rwanda on June 23, only a handful of African countries, the cost of their participation was borne by France, joined Operation Turquoise. Though the decision of France to intervene was a welcome development given the catastrophic loss of lives and the failure of the UN to quickly deploy the expanded UNAMIR II, suspicion on the real French motivation loomed in the background. Even humanitarian aid groups and organizations were sceptical about the French intervention noting the close connection between Kigali and Paris. The decision to finally intervene at the time when hundreds of thousands of Tutsis were already killed and the RPF had already captured most parts of the country from government forces generated suspicions on France's real motivation. In was perplexing that a unilateral intervention had been considered instead of committing troops and equipment to the expanded UNAMIR.

5. 3. The Creation of Operation Turquoise

The failure to reinforced UNAMIR after weeks into the genocide prompted the UN Secretary-General to put forward a proposal that the Security Council should consider the offer of France to lead the multinational military operations for a limited duration to secure and protect "displaced persons and civilians at risk in Rwanda (Security Council,1994e)." But not all Security Council members were convinced of the French offer. China, Nigeria, Pakistan, New Zealand and Brazil questioned the wisdom of having two simultaneous UN-mandated military operations in Rwanda having different command structure with UNAMIR under UN control while the other military operations will be under the control and direction of France. They believed that having a French-led military mission doing peace enforcement operations and a separate U.N. military contingent (UNAMIR) doing peacekeeping operations were untenable and might complicate the

humanitarian objectives. But there was no other alternative to choose from after months of scrambling to assemble troops for an expanded UNAMIR and France was "the only major power willing to put its troops at risk in a country where hundreds of thousands have been massacred" (New York Times,1994). France's offer of leading a humanitarian intervention and bore the costs of the operations had greatly persuaded the majority of the Security Council members to support the move. The U.S. and U.K., who had been dodging calls for the sending of their military forces, were relieved that another member-state offered to do something and U.S Ambassador Madeline Albright had elatedly commended the French offer to militarily intervene (Security Council,1994g).

The Security Council defended its decision in approving France's offer to mount the humanitarian operations by pointing to the fact that the situation in Rwanda needed an urgent response by the international community because the crisis had become a "threat to peace and security in the region" (Security Council,1994f). Operation Turquoise was given a Chapter VII authorization which allowed the troops to use force whenever necessary in the performance of their mandate of protecting civilians. To create a semblance of a multinational force, France persuaded six other African countries to join the humanitarian intervention. The non-participation of any European country and even Rwanda's neighboring states was reflective of the suspicion on France's motivations in leading a humanitarian mission. Yet despite the prevailing doubts, French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe justified the intervention by claiming that France had a "real duty to intervene in Rwanda" and "put an end to the massacres and protect the populations threatened with extermination" (Prunier,1995:280).

The speed in which Operation Turquoise was deployed showed that had France decided to contribute its troops to UNAMIR, UN boots would have been on the ground much earlier. In fact, during the heated debates at the Security Council when the genocide was at its peak, about 8,450 French troops were already deployed in many parts of Africa as part of France's military projection in the continent (Martin,1995). General Romeo Dallaire, the commander of UNAMIR, lamented that the inability to provide troops and resources to the expanded UNAMIR had caused the death of many lives (Dallaire,2003).

5.4. French Protection

The arrival of the French military in Rwanda was greeted with suspicion by the victorious RPF while the Rwandan military was jubilant by believing that Operation Turquoise was not a "mission of mercy but rather on a mission of strategic assistance" (Barnett,2002:149). The French military's arrival was believed to aid the almost defeated Rwandan government forces because they brought with them "light and heavy machine guns, helicopters, fighter bombers, ground attack reconnaissance planes and more than one hundred armored vehicles" (Cameron,2015:106). It was also noted that "the urgently required trucks to transport refugees and internally displaced persons, food and shelter were omitted" (Kroslak,2008:228). The arrival of the combat-ready French military for a humanitarian mission means there was much more than the 'humanitarian' motive used to justify the operations. Preventing the RPF from taking total control of the whole country would have provided the fallen Hutu government with some bargaining leverage in whatever future political negotiations since the Rwandan military was still in control of the last few Hutu strongholds in the southwest. If the Rwandan military had been able to hold on to certain areas of the country, then the RPF would have been forced to negotiate. Therefore, one thing was for certain, if the Hutu-led government had remained a key player, France's influence in Rwanda could have continued and its credibility as a major ally to the other countries in the region would remain intact.

The prospect of engaging the RPF in an open battle would have exposed France's real agenda. Thus, on July 2, in a letter addressed to the Security Council, France informed the UN that it would set up the so-called "safe humanitarian zones" in some areas of the country to protect the fleeing refugees and for the delivery of humanitarian aid (Security Council,1994h). It identified the areas for these humanitarian zones in the southwestern part of the country comprising the districts of Cyangugu, Gikangoro and the southern half of the district of Kibuye, the places which according to France, where the humanitarian problems were most acute. The letter also contained a veiled threat that if the UN would not support the creation of these humanitarian zones, then France would withdraw very rapidly from Rwandan territory. But during this time, these regions had not yet fallen to the RPF and the Rwandan military was still in control in many of these areas

which were strategically close to the border of neighboring Zaire whose Mobotu government was close to the Habyarimana regime and other Hutu officials. Barnett claimed that these humanitarian zones were made into a "military protectorate for the retreating genocidaires" (2002:149). Des Forges claimed that French troops did not disarm the fleeing soldiers and militias and had even assisted them in their escape (Des Forges, 1999). The Organization of African Unity (OAU) stated that "eventually the army and the militia were allowed to slip safely over to the border in Zaire" (OAU, 2000:paragraph 15.75). The French troops were believed to have flown out of Goma the top architect of the genocide, Colonel Theoneste Bagasora, other Interahamwe militias and Rwandan military troops (Ibid: paragraph 15.80). When asked to arrest the retreating genocidaires, France argued that its role was purely humanitarian and that it was not mandated to arrest the genocidaires although it is a signatory to the 1949 Genocide Convention. France had to save the Hutu political leaders from total defeat to ensure their continued inclusion in Rwanda's political processes which in turn would allow France to continue casting its long shadow in Rwandan politics and African affairs. It was difficult for France to accept that a rebel group which it helped defeat three years earlier was poised to take the reins of governance in a Francophone country.

6. Conclusion

The willingness of France in leading Operation Turquoise was not primarily intended to save the Tutsis from the genocide but to aid its close ally, the Hutu-led government. The findings of this article have revealed that the insistence of France for a ceasefire between the Rwandan military and the RPF during the genocide, its adroit move of playing the hero role by offering to lead the humanitarian mission Operation Turquoise, and the protection it had extended to the losing Rwandan military forces and the fleeing government officials were deliberate actions to protect its strategic interests in Rwanda and Francophone Africa. These so-called interests involved several dimensions such as the cultural components of preserving and strengthening the entrenchment of French language and culture; the political aspect which focused in extending support to loyal allied governments and power projection through French military presence; and the important economic objectives of securing a market for French products, investments and a source of raw materials and minerals for various French

industries. France believed that it is justified to protect at all costs these interests from any group or country.

French officials had decided to intervene in Rwanda because they had been fearing of a domino effect on its allied countries if Rwanda falls into the hands of a rebel group perceived to be close to the US. France had long suspected the RPF of being pro-American as most of the group's leaders received training and political support from the US. It had long considered Francophone Africa as belonging to its traditional sphere of influence that it viewed with suspicion the actions of other powers in the continent regardless of their intentions. By saving and aiding the losing Hutu government and what was left of it, France had hoped to preserve its influence over Rwanda and the rest of Francophone Africa. A complete victory of the RPF and the marginalization of the Hutu government would be a blot in French foreign policy. France needed to prevent Rwanda, considered a Francophone country, in becoming the first casualty in what it perceived as the creeping anglophone conquest of Africa. There was no other way for France to protect its interests except to take the higher moral ground of saving innocent civilians. The decision to intervene in Rwanda may have boosted France's image as a compassionate country but in reality, the humanitarian intervention was a shrewd camouflage of its strategic interests.

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