

## 5. The Holocaust as a Guidepost for Genocide Detection and Prevention in Africa



*On 29 January 2008, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and his wife, Yoo Soon-taek, laying a wreath at the site of mass graves at the Kigali Memorial Centre in Rwanda, where over 250,000 victims of the 1994 genocide are buried.*

UN Photo



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# The Holocaust as a Guidepost for Genocide Detection and Prevention in Africa

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We must remember and draw lessons from the crimes committed against the Jews during the Holocaust if we are to prevent similar tragedies in the future. Africa should be particularly vigilant of these dangers in light of its recent past.

Events in Africa since the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, suggest that the deliberate targeting of stereotyped groups, with the expressed intention of annihilating them, continues. This reinforces two salient lessons about the behaviour of governments and the reactions of society to genocide. First, a government in power determined to pursue a programme of annihilation of particular groups, in the name of monopolizing power or creating a supposedly “pure and perfect” society, often succeeds in doing so. The ideologies and actions of the Nazi regime and the Hutu-led government of Rwanda illuminate this sad fact. There are also a number of players and factors that are compounding the violence against the mainly “non-Arab” ethnic groups in Darfur that could threaten the existence of

these groups if steps are not taken soon to protect them. Second, there may be something lurking at the core of humanity that either attracts human beings to violence or makes them indifferent to violence against others. Tepid responses of society to the fate of the Jews of Europe in the midst of the Second World War, and to the Tutsis during the Rwandan genocide of 1994, highlight this.

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While verbal protests might point to a reservoir of decency and goodwill in humanity that could be mobilized to prevent genocide, new approaches to genocide prevention may be required, such as practical, bottom-up, local and subregional responses, to replace existing top-down, international bureaucratic mechanisms.

One such approach might be a “rescue operation”, negotiated and assisted by local and subregional actors, aimed at removing the target groups from the genocidal environment. An example of this was the successful removal, by land

and air, of imperilled Ethiopian Jews from Ethiopia to Israel, in the 1980s. The need for quick intervention was a valuable lesson learned from the Holocaust, when “international actors”—the powerful and resourceful Allied Powers—failed to act to save or rescue European Jews in Nazi Germany. Certainly, a successful “rescue” or “negotiated exodus” of endangered groups is contingent on the willingness of local and regional actors, such as the Sudan, in the Ethiopian case, to assist in the rescue process, or Israel, as another state or society, neighbouring or distant, to accept the threatened group. That willingness could be easily generated when individuals and the rest of society come to see rescue as an important lifeline to humanity in peril, and regard indifference to the plight of the vulnerable as a form of bystanding similar to being a perpetrator of genocide.

The apologies that nations and former heads of governments continue to offer for not doing enough to save the victims of genocide point to the consequences on an individual and society of being a bystander. Memories of standing by while fellow human beings are being slaughtered can traumatize individuals who witness genocide but who might have helped to prevent it. This often guarantees bystanders a prolonged bruised conscience for their lack of ethical behaviour and the outrage of future generations for having done nothing to prevent or stop the violence.

The twenty-first century requires a “global war on genocide” with as much commitment of resources and attention as the ongoing “global war on terrorism”. Success in a global war on genocide will, undoubtedly, depend on genocide early warning systems that can detect signs that a genocide is being perpetrated.

### **1. Signs of genocide**

Comparative studies of genocide since the Holocaust have yielded important information about the early-warning signs of an impending genocide. These signs include radio broadcasts of hate speeches and the demonization of target groups (as in the case of Rwanda). Massive cross-border movements of particular groups to neighbouring States (as in ongoing movements of people from Darfur to Chad) could be a sign that a form of targeted persecution of these groups is occurring in the groups' countries of residence. Prevention of persecuted groups from fleeing, especially when marked by physical killings of members of the group, betrays an existing or developing intent, on the part of the persecutors, to destroy that group. Protracted conflicts over power and control of the State, between governments and armed groups, in which none of the combatants demonstrates any desire to settle their grievances peacefully, can create a genocidal situation. That situation existed in Ethiopia, from 1977 to 1991, when Ethiopia's military government and its armed opponents fought over issues of power, secession and ethnic self-determination. The same situation exists in Darfur, where the Government of the Sudan

and armed rebel movements have been fighting since February 2003, over issues of power, regional autonomy, ethnic self-determination and the distribution of development resources. A genocidal situation existed in Rwanda, from October 1990 to March 1994, caused by armed warfare between the Hutu-controlled government and the Tutsi-led anti-government armed group, the Rwanda Patriotic Front, over similar issues. As we now know, genocidal situations can easily degenerate into an actual genocide.

## **2. Lessons of the Holocaust**

As lessons from the Holocaust affirm, perpetrators of genocide often use the cover of war to pursue a planned programme of annihilation of particular groups. The Allied Powers failed to detect overt and subtle warning signs that the destruction of the Jews of Europe constituted a key part of Nazi war aims in the Second World War or they simply ignored them. As a result, the Allied Powers appeared to have been more interested in defeating Nazi Germany than saving the Jews ignorant, perhaps, of the fact that by the time victory came, much of the hidden Nazi objective of exterminating the Jews of Europe would have been accomplished. The targeted killings of the Tutsi by Hutu extremists in Rwanda also occurred in the context of a protracted war in which negotiated ceasefire and peace conferences appeared to be the top peace goals of international mediators. Hence, protracted wars of attrition in Africa should be carefully monitored for any systematic killing of particular groups in an actual genocide disguised as a domestic power struggle. Acting on these warning signs at their early stages are the best ways of preventing an impending genocide in the context of war.

Furthermore, the Nazis aspired to create a broader German Reich, or a Greater Germany based on openly expressed ideas of merging lands, outside of Germany, inhabited by German-speaking peoples. Nazi utopian aspirations also included hopes of acquiring and ruling over wider territory in the name of creating living space for Germans. An African continent with arbitrarily drawn “colonial boundaries”,

that have restructured ethnic landscapes, has much to fear from these Nazi-type territorial ambitions. People who live in the Horn of Africa region must assume the moral responsibility to oppose the lingering idea of “Greater Somalia” that has since 1962 inspired Somali irredentists to seek annexation of lands in Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti inhabited by Somali ethnic groups. A Somali irredentism in the Horn of Africa, on the order of the German *anschluss* (merger) and *lebensraum* (living space) in Eastern and Central Europe in the course of the Second World War may be unlikely. However, the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda signal that sometimes the unimaginable could be triggered by a few with tanks and utopian ideas. However, not every killing in the context of war, openly expressed prejudices and stereotypes about particular groups suggest an ongoing or pending genocide.<sup>1</sup>

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The Holocaust should also alert Africans, and African Member States of the United Nations, to that genocide’s other notable victims besides European Jews: homosexuals. Cultures that inspire homophobic sentiments can be potential seedbeds of genocide, and should be monitored.

### **3. Responsibility to protect vs. obligation to prevent**

Though not sufficient to predict a genocide, studies of the Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda have galvanized world opinion towards a commitment to prevent genocide or intervene in one to save lives. During the World Summit in 2005, world leaders called for the acceptance of a universal principle of the responsibility to protect civilians from crimes against humanity when governments are unwilling to do so.

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1 Edward Kissi, *Revolution and Genocide in Ethiopia and Cambodia* (Lanham, Maryland, Lexington Books, 2006).

This is another laudable “universal principle”, among many since 1945. But whose responsibility is it to protect target groups? And what might be the best form of protection so that the world does not witness another genocide unfold?

Given the mixed history of international responses to genocide, including “protective” missions to save civilians, from the Holocaust, to United Nations safe-havens that did not stop genocide in Srebrenica in Eastern Europe, to the unfolding genocide and crimes against humanity in Darfur, the best protection is, in fact, prevention. And a top-down “United States-led” or “United Nations-mandated”; “armed humanitarian interventions” or “sanctions regime” might not be the best or practical way to implement this commitment on the African continent.

Past genocides suggest that waiting for outside intervention or an “international” responsibility to protect threatened groups can be lengthy, elusive, and costly in lives. The success of “responsibility to protect”, as a moral principle, can best be implemented through local and subregional endeavours with some foreign help.

The recent history of regional protective actions to safeguard civilians has been more encouraging than their international alternatives. With some help from the United States, the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group [ECOMOG] stopped armed conflict and violence in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s. Proximity, familiarity with a region, and the possibility that nations in the region, such as the case in West Africa, can easily organize rescue missions to save the targeted, provide better, quicker and more efficient protection.

Subregional commitments to a responsibility to protect civilians from crimes against humanity means there should be special offices for the detection and reporting of early-warning signs within these regional organs. It is possible that subregional interventions could be abused by regional powers. However, this possibility could be



minimized by granting a role to the United Nations in a new sub-regional genocide prevention and civilian protection initiative. United Nations logistical support and financial incentives can make service in regional intervention forces appealing and curb the misuse of such interventions by regional powers. African countries can prepare their national populations to accept possible deaths of their troops while providing a moral service to protect groups in their neighbourhood with whom they have cultural affinities and in a region whose stability is essential to their security.

Armed conflicts between governments and armed anti-government groups have been the greatest causes of crimes against civilians in contemporary Africa. State leaders bent on monopolizing power or using it to determine the distribution of resources exact retribution on presumed civilian sympathizers of the state's armed opponents. The history of such conflicts since the 1970s in Ethiopia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda and the Sudan has revealed that beligerent armed "liberation" or "militia" groups in Africa are not innocent victims of state terror. Governments and armed rebel groups are unlikely to protect civilian populations presumed to oppose them. Thus, in Darfur, one may need to go beyond a commitment to protect civilian populations from crimes against humanity such as the burning of villages and the raping of women. It is essential for "world leaders" (broadly conceived to include leaders of African nations) to assume another commitment to be balanced in their condemnations of the perpetrators.

If one is to condemn the State of the Sudan, then armed opponents of the Sudanese Government such as the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) should be condemned in the same manner. Not condemning the actions of the SLA and JEM (now called the National Redemption Front), that could potentially engulf the entire Horn of Africa subregion in genocidal violence, is to condone and encourage the morally hazardous behaviour of these armed non-state groups.

Besides subregional protection efforts, it is also necessary to situate a principle of “responsibility to protect” in a wider framework of local genocide prevention efforts. It is now time to also use culturally-familiar institutions, with their inherent values, to develop a regime of indigenous moral responsibilities to oppose genocide and genocidal rhetoric. Human rights activists in every African country should establish their own local councils of “Elders” and “Community

leaders”. These Elders and Community leaders command enormous respect in their local cultures. Using their roles in society, and invoking forgotten customs that once outlawed genocidal ideas, they can work outside of state frameworks to make prevention of genocide and all forms of mass murder a customary obligation once again. After all, success of genocide, anywhere, depends on the willingness of local populations to accept or condone the physical destruction of a particular group among them. If perpetrators in Africa have to contend with opposition from influential local elders or intervention from

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subregional countries to rescue or protect the victims, perpetrators of genocide may rethink their desires. And if a courageous and conscientious society makes it impossible for perpetrators to succeed, a costly international responsibility to protect civilians, while genocide is under way, would be unnecessary.

#### **4. Perpetrator mentality**

States and leaders who commit or support genocide have come to believe that they could proceed without challenge from their people, neighbours and the rest of the world. Here, again, the lessons of the Holocaust are noteworthy in their most negative sense. The manner in which the Holocaust occurred, especially the tepid international response at the time, made subsequent genocides more likely. Post-

Holocaust perpetrators of genocide appear to have taken inspiration from the Holocaust. They have reproduced its core elements and imagery and taken cues from the lack of organized local and international rescue or protection efforts. As Alison Des Forges reveals in her book, *Leave None To Tell the Story* (1999),<sup>2</sup> Rwanda's assassinated president Juvenal Habyarimana and his "intimates" seemed to have admired Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich. Habyarimana had in his residence and possibly viewed "copies of films about Hitler and Nazism". Hutu nationalists in Rwanda imitated other methods of the Third Reich. What has become known as the "Ten Commandments of the Hutu", partly exhorted Hutus to maintain the purity of their identity by refraining from marrying Tutsi women and men. That is the closest the architects and supporters of genocide in Rwanda came to reproducing, in that country, in December 1990, the infamous Nuremberg Laws enacted by the Nazi regime in Germany, in September 1935, with the same object of maintaining Aryan "purity" through proscriptions of marriages between Jews and Germans. Hutu perpetrators of genocide were also close to the Nazis in the manner in which they devalued their Tutsi victims. For the Nazis, the Jews were "vermin" to be exterminated from Europe's industrial societies and the rest of the world. For the Hutu perpetrators, the Tutsi were "cockroaches" to be sought and killed in Rwanda's agrarian society. Announcers on Hutu-controlled radio stations, used to incite the genocide, brazenly exhorted their listeners to kill all Tutsi and moderate Hutus without bothering about international opinion or response. Des Forges is, therefore, correct in arguing that Hutu perpetrators "had learned that this kind of slaughter would be tolerated by the international community".

Although some ordinary and uninformed people help to carry out genocide, those who initiate and plan genocide are not ordinary and uninformed people. Recent planners of genocide in Africa have been well-educated elites who have a remarkable understanding of

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2 Alison Des Forges, *Leave None To Tell the Story* (New York, Human Rights Watch, 1999).

international politics and the operations of international organizations. They have also read about the fate of the Jews in the Second World War. In post-colonial Africa, elite initiators of genocide can easily portray any international interventions as another example of foreign meddling or neo-colonialism. That charge resonates on the African continent. It derives its force and appeal from the memories of European colonial rule, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the failed United Nations intervention in the Congo and subsequent cold war intrigues on the continent in the 1960s. These facts encourage informed perpetrators of genocide in Africa to believe that they can get away with murder. Thus, new strategies of genocide prevention in Africa that do not depend on “international” actors need to be developed.

## **5. Conclusion: Holocaust and genocide education**

Genocide prevention and civilian protection strategies in Africa should also include Holocaust and genocide education. The United Nations can provide African countries with video footages of the Holocaust and other genocides with local language translations to be shown in all rural and urban areas. Holocaust remembrance in Africa should come with State-mandated teaching of genocide in all schools and military academies to renew appreciation of and respect for others. Such educational programmes should be promoted at the early school-going age before genocidal mentalities develop. Meaningful Holocaust and genocide education in Africa should be placed in the context of familiar historical memories and a broader discussion of one of the Holocaust's most important lessons: the painful price of prejudice. Those memories include the history of the slave trade, participation of African chiefs and merchants in it, and annihilation of particular ethnic groups in the name of progress and pacification in Africa under European colonial rule. These crimes, etched in the collective memory of Africans, originated from the same human prejudices and disregard for human life that devalued the humanity of European Jews and produced the Holocaust.

Help from abroad boosts morale. But, ultimately, solutions to genocide and other forms of mass killing in Africa must come from within. To be seen to be solving one's own problems, and not making them the "responsibility" of others, is the best expression of independence.

### Discussion questions

1. Why might local and regional genocide prevention measures work in Africa better than international approaches? What are some of the obstacles that prevent effective international intervention in African armed conflicts?
2. Comparative studies of genocide since the Holocaust have yielded important information about the early warning signs of an impending genocide. What are these warning signs and how could an early warning system be developed to raise regional and international alarms?
3. What parallels can be drawn between the Holocaust and genocide in Africa?
4. Why should the historical lessons of the Holocaust be incorporated into the educational curriculum of African schools? What can African schoolchildren gain from learning about the tragedies of the Second World War?