

Rwanda's Shrouded Nightmare

By Michael Dobbs

TWENTY years ago this Saturday, the commander of United Nations peacekeeping forces in Rwanda wrote a coded cable to his superiors in New York that has come to be known as the "genocide fax." Citing inside information from a "top-level trainer" for a pro-regime militia group, Brig. Gen. Roméo Dallaire warned of an "anti-Tutsi extermination" plot.

The refusal by United Nations officials to approve the general's plan for raids on suspected arms caches has been condemned as paving the way for one of the worst genocides since the Holocaust. But evidence submitted to the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, some of it still under seal, reveals a murkier, more complicated situation.

New details about the informant known to General Dallaire as "Jean-Pierre" serve as a reminder that history can take a long time to reveal its secrets. Documents that could shed light on unresolved questions about the Rwanda genocide remain under lock and key.

It is commonly recognized that the international community failed miserably in its efforts to protect the people of Rwanda. But even 20 years later, there is much to learn. While the new evidence does not absolve the United Nations and Western governments for failing to act, Jean-Pierre's story illustrates the challenges of trying to make sense of unfolding crises in countries like the Central African Republic or South Sudan.

The trigger for the Rwandan genocide was the shooting down of a plane carrying President Juvenal Habyarimana on April 6, 1994. Over the next 100 days, Hutu militia groups murdered at least half a million members of the Tutsi minority, along with tens of thousands of "moderate" Hutus.

Controversy has surrounded Jean-Pierre's motives for cooperating with General Dallaire, the reliability of his information, and his fate after his request for protection was rejected by the United Nations. We now know more about Jean-

Pierre Abubakar Turatsinze (his full name, established by the tribunal).

Half-Hutu and half-Tutsi, he operated on both sides of Rwanda's political and ethnic divide. While his prediction of mass murder of Tutsis by Hutu militia groups proved chillingly accurate, he misled United Nations peacekeepers on some key points.

Important details emerge from a still secret 2003 interview with his wife by tribunal investigators. At the time of his marriage, in 1990, he worked as a driver for a senior Rwandan official. Jean-Pierre used his connections to become an intermediary to the Interahamwe militia, which aimed to defend the Hutu-dominated regime against the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (R.P.F.) invading from neighboring Uganda.

Curiously, the fact that he was married to a Tutsi and was the product of a mixed marriage does not seem to have affected his advancement in the Interahamwe, at least until late 1993. Around this time, he

Was the 1994 genocide preventable? We need all the evidence.

told his wife that he might have to kill her because the ruling party was planning to carry out "massacres" against, as she understood, the Tutsi population.

Jean-Pierre told General Dallaire's aides in January 1994 that he had been instructed to register "all Tutsis" living in the capital, Kigali — apparently for "their extermination." He also said that the Rwandan Army had supplied the Interahamwe with weapons, and he identified several arms caches. The Interahamwe went on to commit many of the murders during the genocide.

The tribunal found that the Rwandan Army did indeed provide weapons and training to the Interahamwe, but judges were not convinced that the purpose was the "extermination" of Tutsis, as Jean-Pierre claimed, rather than preparation for hostilities with Tutsi rebels. They found that the Interahamwe had drawn up lists of "suspected opponents of the regime," but these were "not focused exclusively on ethnicity."

Evidence submitted to the tribunal in Arusha, Tanzania, showed that Jean-Pierre may have had other motives for seeking United Nations protection. He had fallen out with party leaders, who suspected him of selling arms to rebels in Burundi. Some witnesses believe he might have been an agent of the R.P.F. assigned to penetrate the Interahamwe. There is no reliable evidence to back that claim, but it is clear that he had connections to opposition parties allied with the Tutsi-led rebels — and these caused French and Belgian analysts to suspect that Jean-Pierre might be spreading "disinformation."

Jean-Pierre told the general's aides at their final meeting in February 1994 that he was planning to go to Zaire, for "commando training." Instead he went to Tanzania, where he joined the R.P.F., according to his wife. In late 1994, a minister in Rwanda's new Tutsi-led government informed the family that Jean-Pierre had been "killed in battle."

The circumstances of his death remain a mystery. As his wife told investigators, "I do not know how he died and where." She was unable even to establish whether he was "surely dead."

General Dallaire told the tribunal that he operated on "instinct" in sending the genocide fax, which was followed up by a series of warnings to New York in early 1994 that were rebuffed or ignored. He sensed that the peacekeeping force had to assert its authority. But his superiors in New York needed something more substantive to justify action.

Newly released State Department records show that United Nations officials did brief the United States, Belgium and France on the emerging crisis, but there was zero enthusiasm in the Clinton administration following the "Black Hawk Down" debacle in Somalia in 1993. Stronger intelligence would have been necessary to disrupt such passivity.

The "Jean-Pierre" revelations are a tantalizing indication of how much we still have to learn about the dynamics of the Rwandan genocide. Records that could shed light on whether it could have been prevented are still considered classified in Washington, New York, Paris, Brussels, Geneva, Arusha and Kigali — unavailable to the public despite pledges by international leaders to fully investigate the tragedy. In order to draw the correct lessons, we must have all the facts. □

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