

Genocide in Africa: Inertia or Indifference

Ádám Éva

Zsuzsánna Biedermann:

Genocide and destabilisation in the African Great Lakes Region

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The focal points of the author's analysis are three countries of the African Great Lakes Region: Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The national governments established after independence engaged in a campaign of ethnic cleansing that lasted for decades. In the medium and long term, this undoubtedly improved regime security and engendered personal economic successes and as such, it proved to be a rewarding undertaking from a political economy perspective. At the same time, the international community has ratified treaties undertaking to prevent all forms of genocide since World War II. By reviewing the economic motives at play, the author wishes to contribute to improving the efficiency of the methods of prevention.

Biedermann calls attention to the unsuccessful application of the Genocide Convention adopted in 1948.¹ Under the Convention, genocide is a crime against humanity committed with specific intent (*dolus specialis*) to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group. In addition to the substantive and conceptual shortcomings in the Convention, the main problem is that intervention should be the adequate step taken once signs of genocide have been detected. Typically, however, the international community fails to take action until after the fact (Nurnberg trials, the ICTY and the ICTR ad hoc tribunals).

The chain of events in these three African countries between the 1960s and the 2000s demonstrated that the international community did nothing to prevent or halt the massacres even though it had up-to-date information all along. The United Nations proved to be impotent, and it was not in the United States' interest to intervene. Colonial powers, likewise, had no interest in eliminating their local clientele.

*Ádám Éva is International Relations Manager at the Antall József Knowledge Centre
E-mail: eva.adam@ajtk.hu.*

¹ Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide

The author primarily focuses on the post-colonial conflicts between the Hutu – a part of the population traditionally engaged in farming – and the Tutsi – the wealthy echelon of society that typically raised and herded cattle. The spiral of violence was set in motion by the 1972 genocide in Burundi, an event that has never been acknowledged officially. The massacre, which left 200,000 victims in its wake, was fairly unexpected in a seemingly stable social structure where ethnic diversity was traditionally accepted, there were no religious disparities, and movement within or between the layers of social stratification was free and unobstructed in both directions. In point of fact, however, the root of the tensions lies in the deeply ingrained Belgian administration and the preservation of the colonial economic system.

The ethnic discrimination introduced by the Belgian colonial administration rendered social mobility impossible. While the pre-colonial “subsistence economy” maximised economic benefits for all ethnicities, the extraneous economic sectors imposed by the colonisers (coffee and tea production) benefited none of the ethnic groups; instead, they put a new Tutsi political elite into power whose main ambition was to maximise grants. In Rwanda, the Tutsi supremacy was toppled by the 1959–1961 Hutu revolution, heightening animosities between the two ethnicities. Mounting tensions boiled over in April 1994 in Rwanda when 500,000 people, mainly Tutsi, fell victim to genocide within the span of 100 days. Eventually, the Tutsi RPF took over Rwanda, followed by a massive exodus of refugees heading to Congo, including the Hutu *génocidaire* that participated in the massacres.

The economic meltdown that led to the genocides took place as follows. Amid soaring global coffee and tea prices, the government granted extraordinary subsidies to producers in the 1970s and 1980s in order to stimulate production, and bought up crops at inflated prices. By the beginning of the 1990s, however, plummeting world prices rendered the level of state subsidies unsustainable. Explosive population growth and the lack of resources intensified ethnic tensions, triggering a string of daily atrocities.

In East Congo, the influx of refugees in the wake of the genocides directly aggravated the ethnic unease between natives and Rwandan refugees in the second half of the 1990s (in North and South Kivu). Guerrillas used the refugee camps to launch regular attacks against the government of their home country which, in turn, ultimately retaliated with the massacre of refugees. Taking advantage of the rich mineral resources of the area (tin, tantalum, wolfram) contributed to the wars for “self-preservation” in the region. To this day, the mineral resources to which Congo is entitled are transported and sold by Rwanda as its own property, free of customs and tax.

Ruling Rwanda since 1994, Tutsi President Paul Kagame has maintained his legitimacy in the eye of the international community by pledging to abolish ethnic discrimination and citing the constant threat of genocide. Kagame runs a “patrimonial developmental state”, which implies a fair and more broad-based allocation of grants and could guarantee the preservation of the regime far into the future.

The dilemma that emerges by the end of the author’s analysis stems from the fact that, while genocide proved to be a “lucrative” venture for the authoritarian regimes of the African Great Lakes Region, as in the past, the international community will remain reluctant to intervene in the internal affairs of any country in the region. At the same time, infrastructure developments across the region, technological developments and the formation of economic alliances could be an even more rewarding enterprise both for the countries concerned and the international community.