Remarks in introduction to the film ‘Hotel Rwanda’

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The Rwandan genocide was a contemporary crime or crimes – in immediate living experience and memory – and amongst the worst and most intense in history in terms of numbers of killed (with estimates ranging from 500,000 to 800,000 or more deaths, or more than 10% of the total population, including about half the Tutsi population, in less than 100 days).

How is this imaginable in our day and age? Genocides occur in history books, the failures of previous generations, not “us”!

Before looking at Rwanda specifically, let’s reflect for a moment on some of the familiar refrains typically connected with genocides.

1) There is the idea that genocides erupt – that they just happen ... out of nowhere, some sort of act of God or the Devil, like a Tsunami, unforeseeable and unpreventable.

2) Oh, well, genocides happen in “those societies” and among “those people” – undeveloped/backward, barbaric, uncivilized, consumed with “ancient enmities” – perhaps even what darker-skinned people do to other darker-skinned people.

3) Then there are the excuses: “If only we knew”; “if only we had the means”, “if only it wasn’t so far away”; etc. – easy absolutions of our possible connection with the events, not to say our possible responsibility.

In his recent book on Preventing Genocide [Paradigm Publishers, 2008], the leading American Psychiatrist and peace advocate, Dr. David Hamburg, raises the spectre of “instant genocide” and debunks the myth that genocides strike like lightening – out of thin air. Hamburg carefully spells out that genocide is a man-made occurrence. It doesn’t just happen. Unless we’re all deeply pathological (and coincidently so in place and time and, oddly, directed simultaneously at the same particular group), it is clear that genocide is constructed. In fact, genocides have long antecedents. No, genocides don’t just happen. They are organised, instigated, often carefully directed and usually engage and rely upon the active cooperation of numerous actors. They are not the crimes of one nasty person out of control – the myths that Hitler or Stalin or Saddam alone committed genocides. As Daniel Goldhagen details in his book Hitler’s Willing Executioners; Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust [Knopf, 1996], there is typically a minimum of passive acquiescence and usually active participation among the population or key elements of it. One may here recall the excuse invoked by former United Nations Secretary General and
subsequently Austrian Chancellor, Kurt Waldheim, who (when it came to light he was active in the war in service of the Nazi regime) pled he was merely an officer running the trains in former Yugoslavia!

So, we must ask what are the conditions and actions or inactions – sometimes banal and pedestrian – which combine to result in genocide? And what must we do to counter-act them?

Is it really “those societies”? Is it just a matter of “ancient enmities”? Was it the same for the former Yugoslavia – “those people” and, again, “far away”? Some say it’s “a German disease” or a Turkish one ... or perhaps it’s Spanish and North American if we look at the decimation of the indigenous peoples of the New World in the 17th and 18th Centuries and since or even still (if we care to note 20th Century and on-going treatment of native populations). Maybe it’s those Singhalese Nationalist Buddhist Monks – surely not Buddhist Monks!? – who in Sri Lanka have supported extreme measures to wipe out the Tamil menace? The evidence seems to indicate that the propensity to commit atrocities like genocide is not the province of some perverse portion of humankind, but is a species-wide failing and risk. It IS us! This is perhaps a harsh and unhappy observation, but empirical evidence is that humans per se have the capacity to commit atrocities like genocide is not the province of some perverse portion of humankind, but is a species-wide failing and risk. It seems universal. We can concur it’s not civilised – and it offers no “solution”, or not an acceptable one by any moral standard. If this is so, then how can we address this sad propensity? What social, institutional and other means do we have?

Turning to the third refrain of excuses, we must examine whether it was true that, in the Rwanda case (as others), we didn’t know, we didn’t have the means and it was too far away. What are the real facts?

In the case of Rwanda, this is said to have been exactly the “preventable genocide” – wholly foreseeable and foreseen! In his April 1993 report to the UN Commission on Human Rights, the then UN special rapporteur on summary, arbitrary and extrajudicial executions, Bacre Waly Ndiaye (then a Senegalese jurist and now a Director in the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva), exactly reported – one full year before the genocide – on the insidious developments and exactly stated that Tutsis had no protection and were being killed solely on the basis of their ethnicity such that it could already then have been genocide [see UN doc. E/CN.4/1994/7/Add.1 of 11 August 1993 reporting on his visit to Rwanda of 8-17 April 1993]. This report was circulated among all UN Member States, published for the world to see, and specifically debated in the Commission on Human Rights. So we did know. But we simply ignored it. Years later, President Bill Clinton publicly lamented his failure to act calling it the single greatest regret of his Presidencies. Then US diplomat, who was subsequently appointed Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues, and now Professor, David Scheffer, has recounted that
despite the availability of the information in Washington, he just couldn’t get the attention of key
decision-makers, never mind result in any action. When he succeeded, it was too late. The film Hotel
Rwanda shows, moreover, that we had the means – there were already forces on the ground! Then
commanding UN officer General Roméo Dallaire has recounted in book and on film in Shake Hands With
the Devil; the Failure of Humanity in Rwanda [Random House, 2003] his professional astonishment and
personal delusion at meeting brick walls within the UN and exactly irresponsible actions on the part of
powerful forces capable of intervening. There were obvious delays, but also clear refusals to
countenance, make a case, accept responsibility, take some risk, and finally to act. It must be noted that
Rwanda was and remains a small and weak country – it is not a nuclear power, nor a high-tech oil rich
one (like Iraq or Iran). And as for Rwanda being “far away”, this is simply no longer true as a matter of
telecommunications nor in terms of physical access by means of aircraft which were available at very
low risk and at no risk if acting early enough. The truth is that Rwanda was accessible and at very low
cost.

So, if the misconceptions and self-satisfying excuses are set aside – if genocide is a general universal risk
in certain situations and is constructed and therefore foreseeable and also preventable, if it is for us and
if we now do know and in fact have the means to act, then what’s the problem – why do genocides still
occur? Many attribute (partly) the blame to the amorphous boogie man of “lack of political will”. Yes,
in part this is true. But again, how is that constructed? What are the obstacles? Is it true that people –
politicians and populations – really do not care? Let us look closely and critically at the tendencies of
buck-passing and the systemic failures (for genocide is nothing if not a spectacular systems failure – of
governance, of security, of everything that human civilisation normally is working to create and achieve).
What are the systems we have in place? How do international relations really work in the 21st Century?
Who are the actors – those privileged international civil servants carrying our global public interests (and
earning their tax-free salaries) and who are the peace-keepers (often earning their governments foreign
currency incomes) and what are their real interests and capacities, and how are they accountable? Why
did Kofi Annan as then Under Secretary General responsible Peacekeeping not support Dallaire? Why
did the Belgians pull out, the French prevaricate, decline to intervene, obstruct and possibly do worse?
What was happening in Washington that caused such deadly delay? Indeed, why are contemporary
international relations even dependent upon the determinations of Governments far from the situation
and with other concerns that get in the way of dealing with urgent global public interest matters like
threats of genocide? Why is the global human rights machinery – which really called this one far in
advance and in detail – so anaemic?
We don’t have enough time here and now to review all these and other important questions, but permit me to share a few reflections from my own experience.

At the time of the Rwanda genocide, I was a Human Rights Officer in the Special Procedures (i.e. investigations) Section of what was then the Centre for Human Rights at the Office of the United Nations in Geneva. There had only some months before been created a High Commissioner for Human Rights and there was a pre-occupying struggle going on between the newly appointed High Commissioner and the long-time Director (and failed candidate for High Commissioner) of the Centre for Human Rights. In the first week of April 1994, and just a couple of days before the plane was shot down killing the President of Rwanda, José Ayala Lasso took up his responsibilities as the first UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Who was he? In fact, he had been the Foreign Minister and member of a junta in Ecuador, and most recently the Permanent Representative of Ecuador at the United Nations, member of the Security Council and also Chairman of the committee which negotiated the mandate for the new High Commissioner. In my contacts with him – prior and subsequent to his appointment as High Commissioner – if there was one point on which he was clear, it was that he (and his Government) was against any linkage between “peace and security” and “human rights”. As such, he was not disposed to act. Still, in the face of the situation, he approved the sending of some few Human Rights Monitors “to be seen to be acting”, but without any preparation, training or appropriate skills. Indeed, they were sent with high risks – without even inoculations. The shortcomings were not only within the UN. Well-meaning and experienced humanitarian organisations such as Médecin sans Frontières and the International Committee of the Red Cross were really not prepared for such events and scrambled to react, sometimes creating bases for specific reprisals even resulting in deaths. There were no international mechanisms available to arrest the criminals – no International Criminal Court and no ad hoc mechanism; there had only the year before been established the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia – and it was small and weak and obviously restricted in its jurisdiction. There had been almost no experience of human rights field missions outside the contexts of negotiated peace agreements, so no real idea or means of what and how to deploy. Indeed, I recall later that year, in December 1994, when the Russian “security” forces used aircraft to bomb clearly marked civilian targets in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, the senior staff of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights hesitated to do anything because (despite the film footage before us on the television) there had yet to be received in Geneva a formal complaint from Amnesty International or similar “trusted” source! Simply, the UN machinery wasn’t in place or used to act. And, of course, there are huge questions about the responsibilities of States, of all sorts of operational mechanisms, of institutional competencies and capacities, and of the professionalism and integrity of individuals across the spectrum. If we want to prevent or stop genocide, the necessary institutions and mechanisms need to be constructed and properly resourced, ready for easy, targeted and prompt deployment.
Leaving aside the specific case of Rwanda, at the level of international relations, we may ask which principles apply? Who exactly is to act? Which are the means available? Viewed optimistically, the Rwanda genocide has given rise to some search for alternatives. We need to help furnish States and intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations with alternatives, build their capacities to govern, to understand and implement human rights, achieve good governance, effective management, etc. We also need across the board better diplomacy in the service of human rights and other global public interests. We must engage the proximate causes of such crimes, but also engage in “structural prevention” addressing matters of distributive justice, systemic inequality, State failure, etc. In this regard, let me emphasise that the definition of genocide does not require a single death. According to the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, genocide is the “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such” comprising killing or causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions calculated to bring about its physical destruction, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and forcibly transferring children to another group. Under the Convention, punishable acts include: genocide; conspiracy to commit genocide; direct and public incitement to commit genocide; attempt to commit genocide; and complicity in genocide. So we need not wait for genocide to occur before we can act – which would otherwise be perverse!

There is in this evidently a huge agenda of work to do to address the weaknesses and inadequacies in existing “systems”, and to attack the precursors of genocide and its potential. Just this morning in The Hague, I was consulting with the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (a unique institution of conflict prevention – even of genocide prevention) on his work across the Northern Hemisphere and how early, how deep to begin to engage ... where the seeds may take root and what to do about them. There is without doubt a great amount to do, and we cannot be complacent or self-satisfied with our “successes”; in The Hague I learned that there are more walls in Northern Ireland today than before the conclusion of the Good Friday Agreement – entrenching, rather than overcoming, a deeply divided society which retains the propensity to return to violence. Regrettably, such institutions as the OSCE HCNM are rare and small – and hardly known. Here in the academy, we need to be attuned and sensitive to all this, rigorous in our teaching and focused in conducting research that is practical, and we need to lead in the prevention of genocide as scholars can with impartiality, integrity and courage!

There has been some progress. Today we have more international institutions and more awareness. Just in the last days, I was pleased to see that the UN Secretary General’s Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Francis Deng, has issued an Analytical Framework for detecting and preventing genocide. On quick review, it contains no great surprises. But it is only the tip of an iceberg. How can we multiply this and see it realised in practice?
Regrettably, we must note that the genocide in Rwanda is not the most recent genocide. Arguably, there has been – there is still on-going? – genocide in Darfur. There are also plenty of worries and signs of possible genocides in the Middle East and across Africa, in the periphery of China, in parts of South East Asia and still the palpable hatreds and eruptions of violence in the xenophobic and extremist politics of much of Europe.

We will now watch the film. And in doing so, I am sure we will reflect on what it means for us. Regrettably, in this case it is our world. It is a matter for my generation – not our parents – that the genocides in Rwanda and Darfur have occurred on our watch. We must accept the responsibility and know that if not for us, then who is to take a stand, who is to act? And what will we tell our children if we fail again – that we didn’t know, that we didn’t have the means, that it was too far away? Those are lies we must have the integrity never to repeat.

Thank you.