

Safe Havens in Rwanda: Operation Turquoise

By Sophie Haspeslagh

After President Habyarimana's assassination on April 6 1994, majority Hutus started killing Tutsis and minority Hutus seen as accomplices of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF). The genocide that ensued was ignored by the international community, to the extent that many refused to even call the killings a 'genocide,' a definition that would have made them liable for intervention based on the 1948 Genocide Convention. The genocide killed approximately one million people, another million were displaced within the territory, and two million fled the country.¹ Finally, in May the Security Council ratified Resolution 918, to strengthen the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) by deploying troops under a Chapter VII mandate, but there was little support for the Resolution and nobody acted on it.

The majority of the people fleeing were Hutus escaping potential retribution from the genocide. France offered to intervene, and the U.N. Security Council authorized the French initiative on June 22 1994 through Resolution 929. Its mandate was to "contribute to the security and the protection of displaced persons, refugees and civilians at risk, including through the establishment and maintenance of secure humanitarian areas."²

The French deployed Operation Turquoise with 2,500 French and Senegalese troops. They set up *Zones Humanitaires Sures* (ZHS), 'safe humanitarian zones,' in the Cyangugu-Kibuye-Gikongoro region in Southwest Rwanda. This zone was actually very large, and the 'safe areas' ended up covering a fifth of the Rwandan territory.³

Much has been written about France's dubious 'humanitarian' motives.⁴ Many have argued that France's intention was to help the Hutu government by preventing total victory of the RPF. It is clear that France had strong ties with the Habyarimana regime and that, as Prunier has argued, there was a strong element associated with France's intervention that opposed Anglo-Saxon incursion in a francophone country.⁵ However, the official humanitarian position of preventing severe refugee flows into northern Zaire cannot be disregarded.

The crucial consequence of the French bias towards the Hutus was that Operation Turquoise did not disarm the Hutus, and thus the ZHS were never demilitarized. This was to have serious consequences for the protection of these areas, since the 1.2 million people in the ZHS were fed and sheltered but were not protected. Extremist Hutu militia members who were still armed operated in the zones, intimidating moderate Hutus and killing Tutsis.⁶ These armed activities led the camps to be considered as centers of hostility by the Tutsi government,⁷ greatly eroding the government's support for the ZHS because they were evidently not neutral.

Operation Turquoise did have some humanitarian benefits. First, it managed to stop the refugee flow to neighboring Zaire, which could have been highly destabilizing. It did

protect the few Tutsis still left in the zone, and it is generally estimated that it protected 13,000-14,000 people.⁸ The presence of French troops made feasible the delivery of humanitarian assistance. However, as France withdrew from Rwanda in late August 1994 and UNAMIR forces replaced Operation Turquoise, the Rwandan government became increasingly fearful that the ZHS were used as a conduit for arms and the protective regime greatly deteriorated.

By December 1994, the Kibeho camp “appeared to be a center of hostility and a threat to internal security.”⁹ The Rwandan authorities feared the military buildup in the ZHS, and demanded that they should be closed in April 1995. UNAMIR launched ‘Operation Hope’ in coordination with the Rwandan government in order to disarm Kibeho, which was relatively successful, yet by March there were still 120,000 IDPs in Kibeho and the camp was still seen as a threat by the government.¹⁰ Many IDPs refused to return voluntarily, either for reasons of security or because they were dependent on living conditions provided in the camps. On April 17 1995 the Rwandese Patriotic Army (RPA) moved into the Kibeho camp in an attempt to close it, but the incursion led to a significant number of deaths. The exact circumstances of the killings are still unclear, but as the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the events at Kibeho has shown, UNAMIR witnessed a number of summary executions of IDPs by the RPA.

The safe-haven policy in Rwanda greatly eroded the Rwandans’ *right to flee*. At the same time as thousands of IDPs were killed at Kibeho, France blocked the application of Rwandans’ asylum demands on the basis that they were being protected inside their own country.¹¹ Once again we see the case of a ‘safe haven’ policy impeding refugees’ right to flee, without offering adequate protection.

¹ K. Mills, ‘United Nations intervention in refugee crises after the Cold War’ in *International Politics* Vol.35 (4), December 1998, p.408

² Cited in K. Landgren, ‘Safety Zones and International Protection: A Dark Grey Area’ in *International Journal of Refugee Law*, Vol.7 No.3, p.448

³ Ibid, p.449

⁴ See B. Jones ‘Intervention Without Borders: Humanitarian Intervention in Rwanda, 1990-1994’ in *Millennium*, in N. Al-Naumi & R. Meese (eds) *International Legal Issues Arising under the United Nations Decade of International Law*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers (1995),ol.24, No.2, p.225

⁵ G. Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, Columbia University Press (1995), p.281.

⁶ B. Frelick *Safe Havens, Broken Promises*, United States Committee for Refugees. Available at: www.refugees.org/world/articles/safehavens_98html

⁷ K. Landgren, p.450

⁸ K. Mills, p.410

⁹ Letter from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, UN Doc. S/1995/411, 23 May 1995, Art. 12

¹⁰ Ibid, Art. 20

¹¹ J. Hathaway & A. Neve ‘Making International Refugee Law Relevant Again: A Proposal for Collectivized and Solution-Oriented Protection’ in *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, 10, 115 (1997)