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Dispute Over U.N. Report Evokes Rwandan Déjà Vu

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When drafts of a United Nations study recently surfaced accusing Rwandan forces of committing atrocities against Hutu refugees in Congo in the 1990s — crimes that could constitute acts of genocide — the Rwandan government protested vociferously. It even threatened to withdraw its peacekeepers from Sudan and elsewhere if the report was published.

The dispute immediately raised some pointed questions. Would the United Nations stand its ground, or would it suppress or alter a report about the past for the sake of the present?

But often lost in the debate was a salient déjà vu: The two sides had been in a similar standoff years before.

In the fall of 1994, just after nearly a million people had been killed in the Rwandan genocide, a team of United Nations investigators concluded that the Rwandan rebels who finally stopped the genocide had killed tens of thousands of people themselves.

But after strong pressure from both Rwanda and Washington and intense debate within the United Nations, the report was never published.

Sixteen years later, a 14-page official summary of that investigation paints a disturbing picture of the victorious rebel forces who would form the new Rwandan government.

The findings in the 1994 report tell of soldiers rounding up civilians and methodically killing unarmed men, women and children.

Several of the allegations are uncannily similar to the scale and tactics depicted in the new United Nations report, expected to be released on Friday, which says that these same Rwandan forces systematically hunted down tens of thousands of refugees fleeing across the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as attacking local Congolese Hutu.

The Rwandan government, whose reputation as one of Africa's brightest success stories has been tempered by increasing allegations of political repression, has vehemently rejected the allegations in both reports as untrue.

“Rwanda faces enough challenges today, including systematic efforts to rewrite history and reignite hatred, to respond to 16-year-old recycled garbage,” said Rwanda's foreign minister, Louise Mushikiwabo.

But Rwanda was not alone in suppressing the old report. One of the participants in the 1994 investigation said that American officials strongly urged the United Nations to block the findings because Washington believed that news of large-scale atrocities against Rwanda's Hutu majority could reignite civil war.

A State Department official said "it does not appear" there was American pressure against publishing the report. [Susan E. Rice](#), the American ambassador to the United Nations who was on the [National Security Council](#) at the time of the Rwandan genocide, declined to comment.

The [United Nations High Commission for Refugees](#), which commissioned the 1994 report, decided not to release it. At least one [internal memo at the time](#) from another United Nations branch said that although reprisal killings against Hutus might have occurred, they were not as widespread and systematic as the report alleged. Other United Nations officials close to the matter said that the pressure was more overtly political, and that senior officials went so far as to deny the report's existence.

According to the 1994 investigation, Rwandan Tutsi soldiers had lured Hutus, including entire families, to meetings to discuss food and security. "Once a crowd had assembled," the report said, "it was assaulted through sudden sustained gunfire; or locked in buildings into which hand grenades were thrown; systematically killed with manual instruments; or killed in large numbers by other means."

Based on a survey of a quarter of the country's communes, the report said that 20,000 to 35,000 Hutus were killed between April and September 1994, and that it happened "in areas where opposition forces of any kind — armed or unarmed — or resistance of any kind — other than attempts by the victims of these actions to escape — were absent."

The report did not equate the killings with the far larger massacres of Tutsi carried out under Rwanda's former Hutu government and extremist militias. "However grave the team's findings," the report said, "they do not mitigate, nor should they be permitted to obscure, the genocidal violence unleashed against the Tutsi people in April 1994."

The 1994 report was obtained from United Nations officials. A member of the investigation team also spoke of its findings on the condition of anonymity, citing a contractual obligation.

"What we found was a well-organized, military-style operation, with military command and control, and these were military campaign-style mass murders," the investigator said.

[Sadako Ogata](#), then the leader of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, declined a request for an interview.

The investigator said he had sharply understated estimates of the numbers of Hutus killed, fearing a political backlash within the United Nations, which had been harshly criticized for its failed response to the genocide. In the end, the firestorm came quickly.

"We had already failed once in Rwanda, and the point was not to flag another massive human rights violation that some people might call a genocide, because that would tempt people to

simply call it even and turn the page,” said another senior United Nations official involved in managing the Rwandan crisis in 1994.

And then there was the Kagame factor. [Paul Kagame](#) led the Tutsi-led forces in 1994, and he is now Rwanda’s leader. He has cultivated powerful friends, like [Bill Clinton](#) and [Tony Blair](#), and has been credited with transforming Rwanda from a caldron of violence into one of the safest, most orderly countries in Africa.

According to former Rwandan government officials who worked with Mr. Kagame in 1994, he was dead set against the United Nations report, partly because it could implicate him.

“I have no proof that he gave orders, but he knew that these crimes were going on,” said Gerald Gahima, a former Rwandan prosecutor general now in exile in the United States. He said that as a commander, “You are not responsible just for the crimes you order to commit; you are also criminally liable for crimes that you know are happening and don’t do anything to stop.”

Faustin Twagiramungu, who was Rwanda’s prime minister in 1994 and later challenged Mr. Kagame for president, said that he met with the United Nations investigators working on the 1994 report and that their findings were congruent with lists he had compiled of thousands of Hutu civilians killed by Tutsi forces.

Though the Rwandan government has punished some Tutsi soldiers and officers for killing Hutu civilians, Mr. Twagiramungu said Mr. Kagame stonewalled efforts to look more deeply into the allegations of mass murder.

“My conclusion is that people who protect Kagame are not in Africa; the people who protect Kagame are in New York and Washington,” he said.

Theogene Rudasingwa, another former member of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Tutsi-led force that took over the country and continues to govern today, said Mr. Kagame’s inner circle often used guilt as a tool to help them avoid scrutiny.

“Whenever such issues came up, we knew how to intimidate the United Nations by saying, ‘Where were you during genocide?’ We did it ourselves,” Mr. Rudasingwa said.

Filip Reyntjens, a Belgian scholar on Central Africa, said the 1994 allegations were no secret, but had they been followed up at the time, not buried, the massacres in Congo in the following years might have been avoided.

“This picture has been generally known for a long time, but nobody has wanted to hear it,” he said. “I profoundly believe that because there was no threat of prosecution for the R.P.F. for the acts of 1994 it emboldened them to act with impunity later. Had we held some people responsible, we might not have seen the subsequent devastation of the Congo, but instead we have gone from one Rubicon to the next.”

United Nations officials say the Rwandans have agreed not to withdraw their [peacekeepers](#) after the new report on abuses in Congo is released. In exchange, officials said, the United Nations will not immediately refer the Congo report for judicial action.