

At Rwanda Memorial Panel, Annan Admits UN Blame

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By Grant McCool

UNITED NATIONS (Reuters) - Secretary-General Kofi Annan on Friday opened a memorial conference on the 1994 Rwanda genocide by accepting institutional and personal blame for the slaughter of 800,000 civilians that was initially ignored by world leaders.

"The international community is guilty of sins of omission," said Annan, who was head of the United Nations peacekeeping agency at the time and had asked countries to provide troops.

"I believed at the time that I was doing my best. But I realized after the genocide that there was more that I could and should have done to sound the alarm and rally support," Annan said in a speech to open the "Memorial Conference on the Rwanda Genocide" to mark 10 years since the massacre.

It was not the first time that Annan had criticized the United Nations and his own mistakes, but he said the painful memory of Rwanda and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the mid-1990s "has influenced much of my thinking, and many of my actions" as head of the world body.

The small central African country was plunged into ethnic butchery in April 1994 after a plane carrying President Juvenal Habyarimana was shot down over Kigali. Hateful propaganda broadcast on national radio blamed minority Tutsis.

Some 800,000 Tutsis and Hutu moderates were slain in about 100 days by Hutu extremists and their followers, armed with machetes, garden hoes and spiked clubs. They were spurred on by radio broadcasts.

The genocide was halted when Tutsi-led rebels overthrew the Hutu extremists, many of whom fled to neighboring Zaire, now called the Democratic Republic of Congo. The rebels went on to form Rwanda's government.

RESPONSIBILITY

In April 2000, the U.N. Security Council admitted responsibility for failing to stop the Rwanda killings. A U.N.-commissioned report in Dec. 1999 accused the world body of being timid, disorganized and misguided before the massacres and failing to intervene once the killing had started.

Canada, which has been a leading organizer of much of the U.N.'s self-examination over Rwanda, said on Friday that the international community had not yet learned how to build structures capable of withstanding such brutality next time.

"Or, to put it more starkly, we have learned what we need to do but I suggest, colleagues, we lack the political will to achieve the necessary agreement on how to put in place the type of measures that will prevent a future Rwanda from ever happening again," Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham told the memorial conference.

Canadian Lt.-Gen. Romeo Dallaire, head of a small U.N. force, was driven to the brink of suicidal depression after returning home from Kigali because the Security Council did not send in reinforcements as Rwandans begged him for help.

At Friday's conference, Dallaire was scathing about the priority given by world leaders in the same period to the break up of Yugoslavia in central Europe compared with the poor response to Rwanda in the heart of Africa.

"One could even say that the Rwandans in the international community just didn't count," Dallaire said. "It brought up the question of whether or not all humans are human or whether some are more human than others."

Annan has designated April 7 the "International Day of Reflection on the Genocide of Rwanda" and supported a request from the Rwandan government that the world observe one minute of silence on that day at 12 noon in each time zone.

"None of us must ever forget, or be allowed to forget, that genocide did take place in Rwanda, or that it was highly organized, or that it was carried out in broad daylight."

The one-day conference heard from survivors of the slaughter and officials' views of what lessons were to be drawn and better ways to respond to any future genocide. ((Reporting by Grant McCool, editing by Giles Elgood; Reuters messaging: Evelyn.Leopold.reuters.com@reuters.net; 1-212-355-7424)