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French Accused of Complicity in Genocide that Killed a Million in Rwanda

By Linda Melvern

An unprecedented public inquiry into France's role in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda held hearings in Kigali last week, where the French army was accused of complicity in massacres of Tutsi.

The seven-person examining commission is hearing testimony from 20 survivors, some claiming serious human rights abuses, including rape and murder, by the French military.

The commission is also examining Operation Turquoise, the 1994 French military intervention that was ostensibly aimed at saving Rwandan lives. Human rights groups in France claim French soldiers tricked thousands of Tutsi survivors out of hiding, and abandoned them to the Interahamwe militia. The three-month genocide claimed up to one million Tutsi victims.

Close links existed between France and Rwanda, the tiny African country ruled by a Hutu dictatorship for 20 years. France was its biggest supplier of heavy military equipment, and sent troops in 1990 to help repel a military offensive from Uganda by the largely Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front, (RPF), against the corrupt president, Juvenal Habyarimana.

During nearly three years of civil war, in some instances senior French officers took operational battlefield control. In 1993, an international peace agreement replaced the French with UN peacekeepers, to monitor creation of a power-sharing democracy.

For years, the French government denied any part in the genocide. Its own parliamentary enquiry in 1997, calling the genocide one of the greatest tragedies of the century, admitted only that France had underestimated the threat. But the enquiry did reveal that the former French president, François Mitterrand, had largely been responsible for French policy in Rwanda.

By 1994, the Rwandan army had become a "military protégé" of France. Before the genocide, 47 high-ranking French army and gendarmerie officers were with the Rwanda military. French officers were attached to the élite battalions, the Presidential Guard, the para-commandos and the reconnaissance battalion.

In April, 1994, French-trained officers from the Presidential Guard eliminated the pro-democracy and political opposition and French-trained soldiers from the para-commando and the reconnaissance battalion began killing anyone with a Tutsi identity card.

The Rwanda Commission has evidence that the French trained the Interahamwe, and

French officers were in commando training centres, where torture was perpetrated, and where political opponents disappeared. Yet in meetings of the Security Council to decide UN policy on Rwanda, France had sat silent. Later, the then French ambassador to the UN, Jean-Bernard Mérimée, blamed the UK and US ambassadors for the international failure over Rwanda.

During the genocide, French diplomats told the UN many had died as civil war casualties, diverting attention from systematic massacres of civilians. France refused to allow the Council to invoke the 1948 Genocide Convention to try to stop the genocide.

Then after five weeks of murders, France launched its own military intervention, with Council blessing, to secure humanitarian areas for survivors and protect displaced people. This was Operation Turquoise.

The French did create a safe zone, but this allowed the political, military and administrative leadership of the genocide to flee. Although the RPF won the civil war, the national treasury, the killers and 37,000 troops moved to Zaire (now the DRC). This is why there are so many fugitive genocidaires; the ringleaders of the genocide took sanctuary in other countries, notably France and Belgium, where they enjoy protection today.

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