

Annan Decries Rwandan Genocide on 10th Anniversary

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GENEVA -- The world must stay alert for warning signs of future genocides to prevent a repeat of massacres like that in Rwanda, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said Wednesday.

"The genocide in Rwanda should never have happened. But it did," Annan told the U.N. Human Rights Commission. The United Nations, governments and the media paid too little attention to "gathering signs of disaster" in 1994 in the central African nation, he said.

Annan spoke shortly after the 53-nation commission -- the top U.N. rights watchdog -- marked the 10th anniversary of the slaughter, orchestrated by the Hutu-extremist government then in power. At least 500,000 people were known to have been killed in the 100-day massacre, though some estimates range as high as 800,000.

"We must all acknowledge our responsibility for not having done more to prevent or stop the genocide. But are we confident that, confronted by a new Rwanda today, we can respond effectively, in good time?" he asked.

"We cannot afford to wait until the worst has happened, or is already happening, or end up with little more than futile hand-wringing or callous indifference," Annan said.

Annan said he was concerned by fighting in northeastern Congo, where violence spilling from neighboring Rwanda has stoked two civil wars. "Ethnic conflicts clearly have the potential to escalate into genocide" in Congo, he said.

He also highlighted the year-old conflict in Sudan's western Darfur province.

U.N. officials and human rights groups have said Arab militia groups, reportedly with government backing, are engaged in "ethnic cleansing" against Africans in Darfur.

"Such reports leave me with a deep sense of foreboding," said Annan. "Whatever terms it uses to describe the situation, the international community cannot stand idle."

Sudanese authorities, which deny the claims, have invited Annan to send a high-level mission to Darfur.

Delegates at the human rights commission observed two minutes of silence at noon in honor of the victims -- mostly members of the Tutsi minority and politically moderate Hutus.

The international community's failure to stop the slaughter is a source of embarrassment and pain for Annan, who was head of U.N. peacekeeping at the time. Both Annan and former President Bill Clinton have apologized for failing to intervene.

The genocide began hours after the mysterious downing of the plane carrying President Juvenal Habyarimana on April 6, 1994. But Tutsis, who now dominate the nation's government and army, say the slaughter began April 7 in part because they don't want the date to coincide with the shooting down of Habyarimana's plane -- a date with political meaning for radical Hutus.

U.N. investigations after the genocide highlighted a series of errors.

There were some 2,500 U.N. troops in Rwanda when the killing began, but on April 21, the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution to reduce its force to a staff of 270 troops.

On May 16, the Security Council passed another resolution providing for the deployment of some 5,500 troops, but they didn't begin to deploy until after the genocide had ended.

Asked why Annan was not taking part in a memorial event in Rwanda, U.N. spokeswoman Marie Heuze told the AP that he had instead chosen to deliver his speech at the human rights commission because he wanted to set out a new "early warning mechanism" involving the U.N. body.

"This commission ... should be well placed to sound the alarm," Annan said, noting that a U.N. rights expert had called international attention to the looming massacre in 1993. "Alas, no one paid attention," he added.