Killing fields: the slaughter in Rwanda confounds the United Nations.
Mollins, Carl  Maclean's  05-16-1994

On a global scale of strategic or economic importance, Rwanda appears not to be worth fighting about. That was made clear last week in capitals from North America to Europe to Africa itself. Squeezed between Tanzania's East African highlands and the westward chain of lakes and rivers that feed the Nile, bordered on the mountainous north by Uganda and on the south by its troubled twin republic, Burundi, it is among Africa's poorest and most densely populated countries: less than half the size of Nova Scotia, it has almost 10 times its population (an estimated 8 million). It subsists meagrely on exports of coffee, tea and insecticide derived from chrysanthemums. Its picturesque high grasslands are eroded by tropical rain, over-farming and the pasturing of cattle. But its people--at least the leaders of Rwanda's two main ethnic groups and factions within them--have demonstrated time and again their belief that it is worth fighting to the death for the right to rule the impoverished land. And now, Rwanda's fourth major civil war in 35 years, by all accounts its bloodiest, has once again stymied the world community's capacity to forestall such conflict or stop such slaughter.

Rwanda has thus joined the list of killing grounds--Somalia, Bosnia and Haiti among them--which have for the most part defied the promise of a more humane new world order in the 1990s, an order of security to be enforced by the major powers through the United Nations. By last week, a month of bloodletting had claimed the lives of as many as 250,000 people, and international relief and aid organizations rallied to shelter and feed an equal number of Rwandans who had fled as refugees to Tanzania.

The government of Tanzania strove to renew the ceasefire accord that it brokered last August between leaders of Rwanda's majority Hutu people and the Tutsis, the region's historic rulers, although outnumbered 10 to one. That pact was shattered with the deaths of the presidents of both Rwanda and Burundi in a plane crash on April 6. In Kigali, the Rwandan capital, Canadian Maj.-Gen. Romeo Dallaire and his puny contingent of UN troops maintained a heroic stand, trying to protect threatened citizens amid the horror of killings by machete and gun, and distributing food and medicine from dangerous relief flights by a Canadian Hercules transport plane. But despite UN appeals for reinforcements to restore order, the rest of the world stood aside.

But even as television newscasts daily showed horrific images of bloated corpses piled up in the streets of Kigali or floating down rivers, the consensus of diplomats representing UN members in New York City, and of their governments, was that there is no obvious solution. There is no certainty, after the experiences in Somalia and Bosnia, that a show of force would work to bring peace without the consent and co-operation of the combatants. There was even uncertainty about whether the killing was solely a renewal of historic tribal rivalry between the Hutu and Tutsi. That enmity dates from the 16th century, when the Tutsis, stately Nilotic Watusis, the males commonly seven feet tall, conquered the Bantu Hutus and the original pygmy inhabitants. The Tutsis maintained power even during German and later Belgian colonial control for most of this century. (King Kigeli V, deposed eight months before Rwanda achieved independence in 1962 under its first Hutu government, lives in poverty in Washington at age 57.)

Some reports from Rwanda indicate that brutal politics, rather than tribalism, is behind the bloodshed. They note that it is far from certain, for one thing, that Tutsi rebels shot down the plane carrying the president, as Hutu government figures claimed, sparking the first wave of slaughter by Hutus. And Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyama, a Hutu, was among the first victims of those killings, along with Belgian UN soldiers guarding her. That means, says historian Alison DesForges, an advisory member of the Washington-based Human Rights Watch/Africa, that the initial mayhem was provoked by a faction in the largely Hutu Rwandan military that opposed the government's accord with Tutsi leaders to share power. It was only then, that assessment goes, that the rebel Tutsi army, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, advanced on Kigali from the north. And last week, when a Canadian Hercules came under small-arms fire in Kigali airport, prompting the crew to make an emergency takeoff and forcing the suspension of relief flights, it was unclear who was doing the shooting, although Hutu forces were based on the airport perimeter.

In the face of such confusion, UN members, including Canada, turned a deaf ear to pleas for military reinforcements. UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali appealed in vain to Belgium and France, a supplier of arms to the Rwandan army, to reverse their mid-April decisions to withdraw their threatened forces from Rwanda. He then fruitlessly asked other Western countries to replace
them, and finally urged African countries to intervene.

The lack of will to respond forcefully reflected fears aroused by the changing demands on the world community to intervene as police in internal disputes without the prior agreement on a truce by the combatants and a clear-cut role for peacekeepers. The danger for governments, ever mindful of voter reaction, is that they could be dragged into a protracted struggle with heavy casualties. You have to have some willingness on the part of the warring parties to come to an agreement," said Canadian Defence Minister David Collenette last week.

That was a view also expressed by President Bill Clinton, both in a televised defence of his foreign policy and in the subsequent release of a presidential directive setting out guidelines for any future U.S. participation in peace operations. As well, referring to the costly and fruitless escalation of the UN starvation-relief mission in Somalia last year into a U.S. military campaign against one political-military faction, Clinton added that, in Rwanda, I think we can take the lessons we learned and perhaps do a better job there over a longer period of time." America should help relieve starvation, he said. The longer-term policy guidelines require participation in peace operations to be in U.S. interests, to receive congressional approval and to keep U.S. control over the operations of American forces.

Despite such caution, Clinton said in his TV appearance that he would not rule out the use of U.S. force to topple the military regime in another trouble spot closer to home: Haiti. Any such move is opposed by U.S. military and other advisers, who argue that using force in Haiti would likely involve U.S. forces in the same kind of political-military quagmire experienced in Somalia--which in turn has influenced the decision to avoid active military intervention in Rwanda. One reason for the different line on Haiti: Clinton is under powerful political pressure, especially from the black caucus in Congress, to abandon the policy of turning back Haitian boat people fleeing to Florida. Removing the Haitian dictatorship, and delivering aid to the Caribbean country's destitute population, would eliminate the reasons for the flight of refugees and clear the way for lifting UN trade sanctions--which instead were expanded last week.

Critics accuse the Clinton administration of applying different standards--based on race--in overwhelmingly black Haiti than in European Bosnia, where U.S. warplanes are committed to enforce UN agreements violated by Serb forces. Some commentators say the same in contrasting the policies towards Rwanda and Bosnia. Rwanda is little-known to North America, a distant heart of darkness.

One thing is known of that suffering country: its natural splendor. American zoologist Dian Fossey focused the attention of the outside world on Rwanda, where she lived among the dwindling mountain gorillas. She wrote about those peaceable kin of the earliest humans in her 1983 book, Gorillas in the Mist. She was slain there two years later, probably by the poachers she opposed for much of her life. Anywhere you look there is beauty," she had said of Rwanda. Not for now, however, nor perhaps for long after a helpless world stood aside from the ugly slaughter of its people.

COPYRIGHT 1994 Maclean Hunter (Canada)