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The Effects of Peacekeeping in Rwanda

In 1993, UN peacekeepers were deployed in Rwanda to oversee the implementation of the Arusha Accords, a peace agreement with the intention to end a civil war. However, instead of helping with national reconciliation, the UN soldiers witnessed the genocide of the Tutsi people started by Hutus in high positions of political power. This genocide came after the death of Rwanda's president, Juvénal Habyarimana, in April 1994. UN peacekeeping soldiers had little freedom when it came to making decisions while tasked with protecting the citizens, which made it difficult for them to successfully fulfil their mandate. If they were granted the ability to use force in a way that would not result in severe or fatal injury, they would have been able to obtain the necessary authority and respect to make the mission in Rwanda a success.

The Rwandan genocide is considered to be a failed peacekeeping mission by many, but there were some positive aspects of the mission. To be able to properly protect the Tutsi people, the UN peacekeepers had to prove their trustworthiness. They did this by “adopting” orphanages in an effort to raise community engagement and to show that they were not threatening. (Lakin) The genocide made everyone wary of those around them, so the peacekeepers became figures the Tutsis could trust when they were unable to turn to those around them for help. However the mission was not only about gaining trust, it was also about stopping genocide and helping those in danger. Because peacekeepers were not allowed to use force, they often had to come up with creative solutions to their problems. One soldier had a very peaceful success story. Peter Sosi led

a unit that aided Tutsis who had to flee their homes and seek refuge in a hotel. While this hotel later fell under the control of the Interahamwe – a genocidal Hutu militia group– Sosi and his soldiers came up with unconventional solutions to get past Hutu blockades and evacuated the hotel. Sosi offered the person at the front of the blockade a can of Coca-Cola to let the UN pass through and help the Tutsis. Surprisingly, this worked and they were able to get what they wanted without using force. (Lakin) The fact that Sosi was able to get through to the Hutus after using a non-violent tactic shows that not everything has to be violent to be a viable solution.

The peacekeeping mission in Rwanda may have had its positives, but it also had its negatives. On April 7th, the first full day of massacres, 10 Belgian UN peacekeepers, who were tasked with protecting the Prime Minister, were murdered by members of Rwanda's Presidential Guard. This act struck fear in Belgium and other countries. (Foot) They quickly started withdrawing their soldiers from Rwanda, and by April 21st, the number of UN troops had dropped from 2,584 to 270. (UNAMIR) With more and more peacekeepers leaving their temporary bases, this showed how defenceless the peacekeepers had become. With that, the militiamen moved in and murdered crowds of Rwandans who were sheltered there under the protection of UNAMIR — the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda. The UN peacekeepers did not impose violence to maintain peace; however, this mandate made the troops powerless in Rwanda. As stated by Lindsey Hilsum, “They did not take on the killers because their mandate did not permit it. Their mandate was to keep the peace but there was no longer any peace to keep.” (Hilsum) Thousands of Rwandan citizens were being massacred and the peacekeepers were unable to do anything but become witnesses to genocide. Canadian major general Roméo Dallaire led the mission in Rwanda and he stated in an interview a couple of

months after the genocide that, “If [he] had the mandate, the men and the equipment, hundreds of thousands of people would be alive today.” (Foot)

The purpose of the United Nations peacekeepers was to reduce violence and help the civilian population; this was something they were not able to do without the use of non-lethal force. Without the use of force, the peacekeepers did not have enough authority to be taken seriously by the Hutu militias, this posed a problem for the soldiers that were leftover after the mass withdrawal. When the threat to the safety of civilians and peacekeepers became more evident, countries decided to withdraw their troops, leaving the Rwandan citizens even less protected. After the Belgian troops were ambushed and the country pulled their troops out, other countries took that as a sign that they should also take out their forces for fear of their troops being on the receiving end of a similar event. (Foot) When withdrawing their soldiers, countries did not take into account how the situation would affect the citizens of Rwanda and the remaining soldiers from other countries. The number of leftover soldiers did not come close to the number of Hutu rebels; therefore, they were unable to assert their authority. Furthermore, without the proper tools, the UN peacekeepers were unable to properly command the situation because they were not being taken seriously. The UN Security Council granting the peacekeepers the ability to use non-lethal force would have aided in their attempt to show authority over the Hutus and further help the Tutsi people. While there might be some methods to gain control that do not use force, those are considerably harder and will only get you so far. The Tutsi people were reluctant to trust the peacekeepers, but gaining their trust was easier than getting an organization, based on genocide, to give up the power it had and make it stop without some kind of authority. Authority is easily acquired through force, making it one of the most logical options for taking control of the situation in Rwanda.

In summary, the United Nations peacekeeping mission during the Rwandan genocide was not handled properly by people in power, and the troops there were limited in their effort to do what they could for those in danger. Using creative and non-violent tactics to get past Hutu blockades and gaining the trust of Tutsi individuals was what they were forced to do, but the peacekeepers would have been able to do more to help with a larger number of soldiers and the ability to use non-lethal force. The leader of the mission said he felt they could have done more if they were able to use force. Hearing that from someone who was there really puts into perspective how difficult it was to ensure the safety of those they were tasked with protecting. Many problems arose during the mission in Rwanda, but they could have been solved much better given the correct mandates.

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