

Rwandans Die While the U.N. Procrastinates

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To the Editor:

"The United States forced the United Nations Monday to scale down its plans and put off sending 5,500 African troops to Rwanda in an effort to end the violence there" (front page, May 17).

This letter is to protest the inadequate Security Council Resolution 918 on Rwanda. In no way can this resolution be described as a serious attempt to face up to the horror of the tragedy that is Rwanda today.

We at Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders), the international medical aid agency working with victims inside the country and in the refugee camps, call on the Security Council to take urgent measures to end the genocide being perpetrated against the Tutsi people. The secure areas the resolution mentions must be set up immediately and swift action taken to insure the deployment of the 5,500 troops it authorizes.

Within five weeks at least 200,000 Rwandans have been killed, half a million more are now refugees, and there are hundreds of thousands of displaced people trapped inside the country. Our expatriate workers have had to stand helplessly by and watch the massacre of at least 100 of our local Rwandan workers in acts of such unspeakable savagery that we were finally forced to abandon some areas. More than 4,000 Rwandans flee the country every day, and the Benako refugee camp has become the second biggest "town" in Tanzania.

Nothing in Resolution 918 will stop any of this, particularly when deployment of the United Nations force, if it is ever deployed, is likely to proceed very slowly. Will there be many Rwandans, particularly Tutsis, left to assist when the troops finally arrive?

And will they end, like the Belgian soldiers before them, tearing up their berets in frustration at a toothless mandate that limits them to being mere observers of the cold-blooded massacres of defenseless women and children, allowed to take action only in "self-defense"?

Ethnic tensions within Rwanda are being exacerbated to pursue political goals. Death squads and militias, originally the youth wings of the government party and its associates, armed and trained by senior government officials, are pursuing everyone perceived as opponents, and by extension this means all members of the Tutsi minority.

There is no other word for this than genocide, yet Resolution 918 makes no serious call for the perpetrators to be brought to justice and internationally condemned. This has to be done, or we will certainly see similar atrocities committed in other countries by those who see such large-scale crimes go unpunished.

Why does the resolution refer to "protected sites and populations" when the United Nations force is given no clear mandate to provide them with protection? Let the United Nations leave humanitarian aid to the relief agencies and concentrate on setting itself political objectives, such as establishing secure areas and putting pressure on those responsible for the violence to bring it to an end.

Then we will avoid another Somalia (where intervention was led by the United States, not the United Nations). However, these objectives have to be defined immediately. The longer the Security Council procrastinates, the more complicated the problem becomes and the more difficult to resolve. Bosnia is proof of that.

It took the Khmer Rouge four years to kill one million people of a population very similar in size to Rwanda's. We have known for a month what is going on. A clearly defined and targeted United Nations intervention is not an option for Rwanda. It is an obligation. ALAIN DESTEXHE, M.D. Secretary-General Medecins Sans Frontieres Brussels, May 18, 1994