

New report details France's role in Genocide against the Tutsi

The New Times, April 20, 2021



Youth carry remains of Genocide victims that were exhumed from different mass graves during an event to give them a decent burial at Nyanza-Kicukiro Genocide Memorial in 2019. / All photos : Sam Ngendahimana.

A team of legal experts led by American jurist Robert F Muse from the Washington-based law firm Levy, Firestone Muse LLP, on Monday, April 19 handed their report on the role of France in the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, a report that was presented to the cabinet chaired by President Paul Kagame.

The report showed that the French government was neither blind nor unconscious about the Genocide and provided unwavering support to the Genocidal government that was in power then.

The 600-page report dubbed; ‘A foreseeable Genocide : the role of the French Government in connection with the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi’ was a result of four years of research. It was commissioned in 2017 by the Rwandan government.

Here below we republish the five reasons advanced in the report’s executive summary pointing to France’s role in the massacre in which over a million people were killed in just 100 days.

1. 1990 : The French government responded to the RPF offensive by assisting Habyarimana’s war effort. The French government continued to extend military support despite human rights abuses, anti-Tutsi massacres, and reservations among French officials.

On 2 October 1990, President Habyarimana phoned the Élysée in Paris, to plead for France to help his government repel the RPF’s military offensive. The French official who took his call was not President Mitterrand, but rather the president’s son, Jean-Christophe Mitterrand, the head of the Élysée’s “Africa Cell,” which largely controlled French policy in Africa.

The younger Mitterrand, responding to Habyarimana’s request for help, gave “a bland and reassuring answer” before turning to historian Gérard Prunier, who happened to be in the room at the time, and saying, “We are going to send him a few boys, old man Habyarimana. We are going to bail him out.” “In any case,” he added, “the whole thing will be over in two or three months.”

As Jean-Christophe Mitterrand may have known, when the war broke out, there were already French military cooperants on the ground in Rwanda, including several who had been working to train key units of the Rwandan Armed Forces—the reconnaissance battalion, the para-commando battalion, and the aviation squadron—that were among the first dispatched to repel the RPF troops.

By 4 October 1990, three days after the war began, these French military cooperants would be joined in Rwanda by 150 French troops to help secure Kigali and its airport. This deployment, followed soon afterward by the arrival of another 150 French soldiers, marked the beginning of Operation *Norôit*.

President Mitterrand tried to assure the French people that the purpose

of this operation was to “permit the evacuation of the French and of a number of foreigners who placed themselves under our protection.” The Noroît troops, he said, “had no other mission but that one, and once this mission is completed, of course, they will return to France.” This was a lie. Internal communications and recent statements from Mitterrand’s advisors confirm that the mission also had an unofficial purpose : deterring the RPF advance.

To that end, the French intervention was successful. In the skies, Rwandan pilots aboard French-made Gazelle helicopters unleashed rocket attacks that played a decisive role in halting the RPF army’s advance. French instructor-pilots often sat alongside their Rwandan pupils during the early stages of the war. Colonel Laurent Serubuga, the FAR’s deputy chief of staff and a core member of the Akazu, would later tell a visiting French official that the FAR’s French-trained elite units, “backed by France,” deserved the credit for the Rwandan government forces’ “October victory” over the RPF military.

Serubuga welcomed the RPF attack, according to France’s ambassador to Rwanda from 1989 to 1993, Georges Martres. For Serubuga, the attack offered the pretext that government anti-Tutsi hardliners like himself needed to massacre Tutsi.

Although Ambassador Martres knew this, the French government nonetheless secretly appointed a special advisor to Serubuga to improve the FAR’s fighting capabilities and to participate in high-level discussions about battlefield tactics.

Massacres of Tutsi civilians were, in fact, already under way on 11 October, the day the French government appointed the advisor to Serubuga. Days after the RPF military began its 1 October 1990 offensive, Rwandan government soldiers and militias began massacring Tutsi civilians in the northeast of the country near the site where the RPF entered Rwanda.

These massacres were widely publicized in the Western media. On 10 October 1990, for example, Reuters reported that approximately 400 Rwandan civilians fled to Uganda after Rwandan government troops and Hutu militias attacked peasants accused of supporting the RPF : “Soldiers shot peasants and burned down huts while Hutus hacked women and children with machetes ...in attacks on at least nine settlements inhabited mainly by the minority Tutsi tribe in northeast Rwanda, the villagers said.”

One witness recounted the kind of scene that would become all too familiar four years later, during the Genocide : “One woman died after Hutus hacked off her arms and forced them into her mouth.... Her two small children, aged one and five were then slaughtered.”



A total of 84,439 remains of Genocide victims exhumed from mass graves are given a decent burial in Kigali in 2019. Photo : Sam Ngendahimana.

Another witness said, “The whole place was littered with bodies, it seems more people died than escaped.”

This was not an isolated incident. Government soldiers and militias massacred Tutsi on the other side of Rwanda, too. More than 250 kilometres southwest of where the RPF troops had crossed into Rwanda, in the town of Kibilira, they killed more than 300 mostly Tutsi civilians and burned more than 400 mostly Tutsi homes. The French government knew about these attacks.

A 13 October 1990 cable to Paris, signed by Colonel René Galinié, the head of *Noroît* (who also served as defense attaché to the French embassy and the head of France’s military assistance mission in Rwanda) and transmitted by French Ambassador Martres, reported :

Organized by the MRND, Hutu farmers have intensified their search for suspicious Tutsis in the foothills; massacres are reported in the region of Kibilira, 20 kilometers northwest of Gitarama. As previously indicated, the risk that this conflict will spread seems to be becoming a reality.

Two days later, on 15 October 1990, Ambassador Martres acknowledged that the Tutsi population in Rwanda feared a genocide. “[The Tutsi population] is still counting on a military victory,” Martres wrote in a memo titled “Analysis of the Situation by the Tutsi Population.” “A military victory,” he continued, “even a partial one, would allow them to escape genocide.”

Despite such warnings, on 18 October, an advisor reported to President Mitterrand, “We ... responded positively to the requests made by the Rwandan authorities for the supply of ammunition and that we have in particular sent rockets for ‘Gazelle’ helicopters. A plane carrying new rockets left this morning for Kigali.”

On 24 October, Col. Galinié issued a more emphatic warning. Rwandans, he wrote would never accept the reestablishment in northeast Rwanda of what he called “the despised regime of the first Tutsi kingdom.” His prediction—chilling, in light of what was to come—was that “this overt or covert reestablishment would lead[,] in all likelihood, to the physical elimination of the Tutsi within the country, 500,000 to 700,000 people, by the Hutu, 7,000,000 individuals.”

Looking back at this period during his 1998 testimony before a French parliamentary mission of inquiry into France’s actions in Rwanda from 1990 to 1994 (Mission d’information parlementaire, or MIP), Ambassador Martres admitted : “The Genocide was foreseeable as early as then [October 1990], even if we couldn’t imagine its magnitude and atrociousness.”

Speaking in 2014 at a conference exploring mistakes made before and during the Genocide, Mitterrand’s closest advisor, Hubert Védrine, acknowledged hearing Mitterrand “say very early, in 1990-1991, that the situation in Rwanda was very dangerous and could only lead to a civil war and massacres.”

Védrine added, “I am not saying that he anticipated a genocide in the form that it eventually took, nobody imagined that. But from the very beginning, he had the idea that this was a dangerous situation which could only lead to massacres.”

The day after the 10 October 1990 reports of government-sponsored massacres appeared in the European press, Admiral Jacques Lanxade—then Mitterrand’s top military advisor—proposed to Mitterrand a partial withdrawal of *Noroît* forces so that the French government would not “appear too implicated in supporting Rwandan forces should serious acts of violence against the population be brought to light in current operations.”

Mitterrand turned him down, and *Noroît* soldiers would remain in Rwan-

da even after the Belgian government withdrew its troops over Habyarimana's human rights abuses (known also to the French government). Mitterrand emphasized in a cabinet meeting on 17 October 1990 that the conflict in Rwanda was an opportunity to fill a vacuum left by Belgium : "We maintain friendly relations with the Government of Rwanda, which has come closer to France after noticing Belgium's relative indifference towards its former colony."

By early January 1991, some French officials believed the RPF's military threat had dwindled sufficiently for France to reduce its military footprint. Mitterrand again rejected Lanxade's advice to reduce the number of French troops in Rwanda. Emboldened by continued French military support, the Rwandan government resisted diplomatic and political engagement with the RPF.

Without political recourse, the RPF resolved to take its case back to the only forum that demanded the Habyarimana regime's attention : the battlefield.

In late January 1991, the RPF army, having regrouped under the leadership of Paul Kagame, staged an unexpected attack on Ruhengeri, a Habyarimana stronghold in northwestern Rwanda. The evening of the attack, at the Élysée, Mitterrand authorized Noroît to evacuate French and other foreign nationals from the Ruhengeri area.

When Admiral Lanxade recommended that France limit itself to retrieving its nationals and leave it to the Rwandans to "try to get the rebels to leave," Mitterrand balked : "We cannot limit our presence. We are at the edge of the English-speaking front. Uganda cannot allow itself to do just anything and everything. We must tell President Museveni : it's not normal that the Tutsi minority wants to impose its rule over the [Hutu] majority."

His reply was clarifying. It showed not only that Mitterrand saw a more expansive role for French troops in Rwanda, but that his understanding of Rwandans went no deeper than their ethnic identification. To Mitterrand, Rwanda was a Hutu country, and the RPF, which he oversimplified as a Tutsi movement, could not lead a Hutu country.

The RPF hoped to persuade its Rwandan and French counterparts that "politics is not in the blood ; it is in the ideas," in the words of the RPF's then-Secretary General Tito Rutaremara.

Months before Mitterrand's late January 1991 remarks, for example, RPF representatives had explained to French embassy staff in Uganda that the "objective of the RPF [was] to liberate the country from the dictatorship of Habyarimana." The French ambassador to Uganda relayed this information

to Paris, along with the RPF's position that refugee repatriation was "certainly essential, but it cannot conceal all the domestic problems in Rwanda (widespread corruption, embezzlement of international aid, political assassinations, etc.)."

French interests in Rwanda and Africa, however, compelled French officials to disregard this information. Defending Habyarimana was a given : to refuse to help him would have risked losing a reliable ally and alarmed other African despots, who would be left to question France's commitment to protecting them from threats to their rule. That reaction could threaten the foundations of French influence on the continent.

How, exactly, to justify intervention to the French people was a more complicated issue.

Having proclaimed, only recently, that France would offer military support to African allies only in response to a "foreign menace" (as opposed to "domestic conflicts"), Mitterrand was at risk of criticism for choosing to help Habyarimana repel an army of Rwandan refugees. He preferred, instead, to insinuate that what was happening in Rwanda was not a civil war—that, rather, the RPF was a mere proxy for Uganda and therefore best viewed as a foreign aggressor.

Thus, on 24 October 1990, Ambassador Martres advised President Habyarimana to "highlight in the media" the RPF's military attack as an external aggression by explaining that "France will be in a better position to help Rwanda if it's clearly demonstrated to the international community that this is not a civil war."

2. 1991-1992 : The French government continued to apply military and diplomatic pressure on the RPF, while knowingly supporting the Rwandan government responsible for the abuse and slaughter of Tutsi.

Days after the RPF's 23 January 1991 Ruhengeri offensive, local authorities in the region retaliated with organized attacks against the Bagogwe, massacring between 500 and 1,000 members of this pastoral Tutsi subgroup that made its home just above Ruhengeri. But even after word of these attacks by government actors against civilians reached France, they did not register inside the Élysée. Instead, a second RPF attack on Ruhengeri on 2 February 1991 persuaded Admiral Lanxade that the French government should send a supplemental military instruction and training detachment (Détachement d'assistance militaire d'instruction, or DAMI) "to reinforce [French] cooperation and to 'toughen' the Rwandan [military] apparatus."

Mitterrand agreed. The DAMI's subsequent deployment, in March 1991, was meant to be secretive and limited. Originally to end within four months, it would last over two and a half years.

France paired its military support for Habyarimana with diplomatic pressure on the RPF disguised as neutral mediation. Paul Dijoud, a French diplomat who oversaw 1991 negotiations between the RPF and the Rwandan government declared that "the French approach is unbiased and aims only to help bring peace to the Rwandan-Ugandan border." Yet, throughout negotiations, there was no question where French interests lay.



Mourners visit a mass grave that was nicknamed 'CND' in which killers dumped bodies of victims during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Ntongwe Sector in Ruhango District.

According to an August 1991 memorandum from Rwandan Foreign Minister Casimir Bizimungu to President Habyarimana, "Mr. Dijoud wanted to meet me after the departure of the Ugandan delegation to reiterate France's unconditional support of Rwanda," adding that the diplomatic talks in Paris had "greatly enlightened us as to France's determination, which sees itself as a friend and an ally." Paul Kagame, at the time chairman of High Com-

mand of the RPF military, has recounted that, during a September meeting in Paris, Dijoud told him, “We hear you are good fighters, I hear you think you will march to Kigali but even if you are to reach there, you will not find your people. . . . All these relatives of yours, you won’t find them.” Dijoud purported to couple such pressure on the RPF with commensurate pressure on the Habyarimana regime to institute democratic reforms.

Habyarimana ended the single-party system in Rwanda but continued to clamp down on dissent and rig the system to keep his party, the MRND, in power. This farce was good enough for the French government, which did not, as Dijoud would later acknowledge, expect Habyarimana to immediately “transform Rwanda into an advanced democracy.”

The depths of Dijoud’s and the Mitterrand government’s commitment to their Rwandan allies would become even more apparent when French officials brushed off the Rwandan government’s participation in a brazen public massacre of Tutsi that would later be referred to as a “dress rehearsal” for the Genocide.

The March 1992 massacres in Bugesera, a region just south of Kigali with a large Tutsi community, were sparked by propaganda aired on state-run radio falsely claiming to expose a plot by the RPF and its political allies to murder 22 members of predominately Hutu political parties. The false report achieved its intended effect. From 4 March, the day after broadcast, until 11 March 1992, government-sponsored militias began to resolve what the MRND viewed as the “ethnic problem” and crush the political opposition.

As the killings began, “[t]hey came in a great crowd, shouting like crazy people,” one survivor said, “They killed four of my children and my wife.” Agence France Press and Reuters highlighted the barbarity of the slayings in contemporaneous reports—how the killers had set homes ablaze and burned people alive. In a week, assailants killed nearly 300 and displaced as many as 13,000.

Ambassador Martres knew within days what the state-run radio station had done. “The Rwandan broadcast ignited the fire,” he wrote in a 9 March 1992 cable to Paris. Nonetheless, weeks later, in Paris, French Ministry of Cooperation officials welcomed Ferdinand Nahimana, who, as head of the state broadcasting agency, had authorized the false radio report. Ministry officials made commitments to Nahimana to increase funding for a Rwandan state television station.

Two years later, Nahimana would lead RTLM (Radio télévision libre des mille collines), the hate radio station that exhorted militias to hunt down

and kill Tutsi during the Genocide.

France's military assistance also continued unabated. As the Bugesera massacres unfolded, Paul Dijoud, the purportedly neutral mediator of peace talks, circulated a note calling for "[a] reinforcement of French support to the Rwandan army" to help it counter the RPF's growing "intransigence." France would, indeed, commit to sending more military equipment to Rwanda during the latter half of 1992.

In all, the French government provided almost \$2.7 million worth of military equipment to the Rwandan government in 1992, in addition to approving more than \$1.5 million in arms sales to Rwanda.

By mid-1992, French journalists began calling out the French government for its continuing support of the murderous regime in Kigali. Jean-François Dupaquier, for example, published a scathing article in June in the French weekly magazine *L'Événement du Jeudi* titled, "France at the Bedside of African Fascism," in which he drew parallels between the Rwandan government and the Nazis and the Khmer Rouge. He took the French government to task for using its military advisors to "supervis[e]" a war on behalf of the Rwandan government against the RPF that was "less and less military, and increasingly uncivil."

On 5 June 1992, the RPF military launched a major offensive in Byumba for the purpose of strengthening the RPF's bargaining position with Habyarimana. The French government swiftly came to Habyarimana's aid by deploying an additional 150 *Noroît* troops and sending new powerful artillery to the FAR. In August 1992, another massacre of Tutsi, this time in the western city of Kibuye, did nothing to deter the continuing French military support.

By October 1992, peace talks, which had proceeded in fits and starts during the war and produced a cease-fire in July 1992, appeared promising for achieving a comprehensive solution to the conflict. But extremists came out strongly against the progress. The newly formed anti-Tutsi extremist party, the *Coalition pour la défense de la république* (Coalition for the Defense of the Republic, or CDR) organized an 18 October 1992 march protesting the Arusha negotiations and supporting "the presence of French troops and François Mitterrand [sic]."

Within days of the march, CDR members assassinated two moderate politicians. After negotiators in Arusha, with French and other international observers present, reached a preliminary power-sharing agreement in Arusha on 31 October, Habyarimana took a cue from the CDR and immediately

began undermining the peace process, criticizing his own negotiators in two radio addresses in early November 1992 and then, in mid-November, declaring that a cease-fire reached in July was merely a piece of paper. "Peace is not confused with papers," he declared.

One of the government's negotiators in Arusha, the notorious anti-Tutsi extremist Colonel Théoneste Bagosora, left the negotiations in Arusha before they were complete and, within months, initiated a Rwandan military program to arm civilian members of the CDR and Habyarimana's MRND party. Years later, Bagosora would come to be known as the architect of the Genocide.

3. 1993 : Ignoring a devastating human rights report exposing the Rwandan government, France reached the pinnacle of its intervention in the war against the RPF.

At the beginning of 1993, a consortium of human rights groups brought governments sponsored ethnic violence in Rwanda into greater focus for the French government and the world at large. The "FIDH Commission" conducted a fact-finding mission in Rwanda between 7 January and 21 January 1993. After interviewing hundreds of Rwandans and excavating mass graves, the investigators concluded that the Rwandan government had "killed or caused to be killed" 2000 Rwandans and that "they [had] been killed and otherwise abused for the sole reason that they [were] Tutsi." They briefed French officials in Kigali and Paris on their findings. In a 19 January 1993 cable summarizing his briefing, Ambassador Martres noted the "impressive amount of information about the massacres" gathered by the FIDH and suggested the mission's conclusions would force Habyarimana to answer serious accusations about his role in those massacres.

"As for facts," Martres observed, "the report that the mission will deliver . . . will only add horror to the horror we already know." The warnings could not have been more dire or more clear. Still, the French government continued and even accelerated its support of the Habyarimana government.

On 21 January 1993, the very day the FIDH mission left Rwanda, the violence that the government had placed on hold for the benefit of FIDH investigators resumed with a vengeance in the north of the country, leaving hundreds more Tutsi dead. In response to the killings, the RPF army resumed hostilities on 8 February 1993, which had been temporarily halted for peace talks.

As Paul Kagame explained to the Christian Science Monitor : This is not the first time they have done this, they killed people in [Bugesera], and

Kibilira near Gisenyi and also killed the Bagogwe people in the Gisenyi area. We thought these killings would die out as we pursued the peace process but they did not. So we could not be indifferent ; just stand by and watch.

France's response came from the spokesperson of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs : "We are aware of the reasons invoked by the RPF to explain the attack. France does not consider the given reasons [to be] a justification for the resumption of fighting, even if France condemns, in Rwanda as elsewhere, all violations of human rights."

Mitterrand and his advisors did not let the FIDH findings interfere with their continuing determination to pursue the policy that had prevailed for the previous two and a half years : stopping the RPF remained their priority. With the new RPF advance threatening key Rwandan army positions, on 8 February 1993, General Christian Quesnot, successor to Admiral Lanxade as Mitterrand's chief military advisor, and Bruno Delaye, successor to Jean-Christophe Mitterrand as the head of the Élysée's Africa Cell, advised Mitterrand to respond with "delivery of ammunition and equipment" to the Rwandan army and "technical assistance, especially with artillery," noting also that a French company had been put on alert to supplement the French soldiers already in Rwanda. They made no mention of the ethnic slaughter, let alone any consequence for France's continuing support for the government that had carried it out. Mitterrand recorded his response to his advisors' suggestions by hand : "Agreed. Urgent[.]"

The same day, the French government dispatched to Rwanda 121 soldiers, raising the number of *Noroît* troops to 291 (a number that would grow to 688 by 16 March 1993, in addition to the 142 French troops deployed as trainers and advisors to the Rwandan military). Along with the troops, the French government sent more arms. On 12 February 1993, it delivered fifty 12.7 mm machine guns and 100,000 cartridges for the FAR. Five days later, there was another delivery of 105 mm shells and 68 mm rockets.

These shipments were among \$1.5 million worth of weapons and military equipment the French government provided free-of-charge to the Rwandan military in 1993, much of it arriving in the weeks following the 8 February 1993 RPF attack in response to the massacres.

When RPF troops moved within 30 kilometres of Kigali, Mitterrand received two military options from his advisors : withdraw French troops or reinforce them. On 19 February 1993, the president's deputy advisor on African affairs warned that withdrawal "will be interpreted as the failure of our policy in Rwanda. All this will not be without consequences for our relations

with other African countries.”

With Mitterrand ignoring competing advice from Defense Minister Pierre Joxe, who insisted that “we must strictly limit ourselves to the protection of our nationals,” French Special Forces flew to Rwanda with a secret mission to assist the Rwandan government forces in its fight against the RPF. Colonel Didier Tazuin, who led the mission, known as Operation Chimère, later wrote in a memoire that, while in Rwanda, he “effectively direct[ed] all Rwandan operations on the entire front.”

Tazuin and his men worked closely with Augustin Bizimungu, the FAR Chief of Staff whom the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) would convict for genocide and about whom Tazuin, subsequent to Bizimungu’s conviction, would write, “I have always considered it an honour to have known him and to have fought alongside him.”

Tazuin drew up a counteroffensive against the RPF army, which he would later praise for the “hard time” it gave the rebels, leaving 800 RPF soldiers dead and as many as 2,500 wounded in eight days, in Tazuin’s telling. But, much to Tazuin’s regret, Paris pressured him to call off plans to launch a massive effort to push back the RPF army. Later lamenting his decision not to press forward despite his superiors’ disapproval, Tazuin would write, “when the so-called ‘genocide of the Tutsis’ began, I deeply regretted being so disciplined!”

His logic, that defeating the RPF would have prevented the Genocide, would be repeated by several high-level French officials. During the Genocide itself, this perspective would drive French decision-makers who viewed stopping the RPF as the key to ending the Genocide.

Tazuin blamed changes in politics in Paris for undermining his mission. And, indeed, changes were afoot. Not only did the French press continue to look skeptically at the French involvement in Rwanda—a 17 February 1993 article in *Le Canard Enchaîné*, for example, was titled, “Mitterrand is hiding an African war from us”—but even French politicians began to join in the criticism, with Gérard Fuchs, the French Socialist Party national secretary, releasing a statement on 28 February 1993 “question[ing] the decision to send new French troops to Rwanda, when human rights violations by the Habyarimana regime continue[d] to multiply.”

With elections approaching, and Mitterrand’s Socialist Party suffering in the polls—and soon to suffer a resounding defeat, ushering in a conservative “cohabitation” (i.e., divided between two parties) government—the French President announced on 3 March 1993 to his closest advisors and cabinet

members, “We must be replaced [in Rwanda] by international forces from the UN as soon as possible.” Even so, between March and August, France nearly doubled the number of DAMI advisors in Rwanda, a decision even the 1998 French parliamentary inquiry into France’s actions in Rwanda later criticized.

In August 1993, an historic peace accord, signed in Arusha, Tanzania, would facilitate the departure of most, but not all, French troops from Rwanda. Three years of war came to an end (on paper, at least) on 4 August 1993, when President Habyarimana and RPF Chairman Alexis Kanyarengwe signed a peace agreement establishing a broad-based transitional government predicated on power-sharing and an integration of the Rwandan and RPF armies. But it was a fragile truce dependent on the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force (UNAMIR) that France and the other Security Council members agreed to establish, albeit at a strength inadequate to meet the challenges to come.

Those challenges came principally from extremists uninterested in peace with the RPF, who sought to undermine the Arusha Accords and destabilize the country with anti-Tutsi violence. The hate radio station RTLM, founded in mid-1993, would prove particularly effective at pushing the extremist agenda.

While the French government withdrew the remaining *Noroît* troops as of 13 December 1993, Col. Bernard Cussac, France’s military attaché in Rwanda since July 1991, dispensed with the pretext that *Noroît*’s sole mission had been to protect French and other foreign nationals and commended the troops for “present[ing] both a credible deterrent and an effective and decisive know-how that helped stop the fighting.” And France was “not leaving Rwanda,” as Cussac explained.

A detachment of roughly two dozen French trainers and advisors would remain beyond UNAMIR’s arrival “to help our Rwandan comrades in the main areas of their military activity.”

They included advisors to high-ranking FAR officers, including Chief of Staff Déogratias Nsabimana and the commanders of the reconnaissance and para-commando battalions. This work continued even as evidence emerged, early in 1994, that the FAR was arming and training the Interahamwe youth militia in preparation for resumed hostilities against the RPF and a possible slaughter of Tutsi.

Signals of the coming slaughter amplified in mid-January when an informant identifying himself as the Interahamwe’s chief trainer disclosed to

UNAMIR that the FAR had transferred weapons and ammunition to the militia with Nsabimana's consent, and the Interahamwe had conducted trainings for 1,700 militia members at Rwandan army bases.

His superiors, the informant said, had issued orders to compile lists of Tutsi who, presumably, would be targeted for extermination. General Roméo Dallaire, the UNAMIR commander, noted this information in an 11 January 1994 cable to the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations in New York, and in briefings to French, Belgian, and US diplomats in Kigali.

In one of the international community's most flagrant failures in Rwanda, the UN Secretariat declined Dallaire's request to raid the suspected weapons caches.

Ten days later, a plane landed in Kigali bearing 1,000 mortar rounds (manufactured by a French company and exported with the French government's authorization) for delivery from Châteauroux, France to the FAR. Knowing this ammunition had arrived in a nation on the brink, Gen. Dallaire ordered it impounded. "We were all supposed to be moving toward peace, not preparing for war," Dallaire later wrote.

During the first three months of 1994, the extremists continued to thwart the implementation of the Arusha Accords with violent protests and targeted assassinations intended to obstruct the seating of the broad-based transitional government. Having failed to intercede when it mattered, the UN was left "praying for a miracle," in the words of an RPF official.

Although on 5 April 1994, the Security Council decided to renew UNAMIR's mandate for an additional four months, as the next two days would reveal, Rwanda's extremists had other, far more horrific plans for their country.

4. After the Genocide Against the Tutsi began, French officials remained captive to the same inverted thinking that had guided their decisions for the previous three and a half years : the main problem was the RPF—not the genocide the RPF was fighting to end.

On Wednesday, 6 April 1994, President Habyarimana, along with Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira and others, boarded Habyarimana's private jet, which the French government had gifted him. The passengers had been in Dar es Salaam to complete aspects of the Arusha Agreement that would facilitate the implementation of the broad-based transitional government.

At around 8 :30 PM, as the plane was set to land in Kigali, there was a



Youth during a past vigil in honour of victims of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi at Amahoro National Stadium.

powerful explosion over the Kigali airport. The plane had been shot down, killing both presidents and all others on board. “It is going to be terrible,” President Mitterrand exclaimed to Hubert Védrine after learning of the plane crash.

Without evidence, President Mitterrand and his key Élysée advisors immediately blamed the attack on the RPF. French officials would continue to promote this claim for decades, even though cables that have been leaked to the public suggest that France’s own intelligence service, the DGSE, ascribed responsibility to prominent Akazu member Col. Laurent Serubuga, who had worked with French advisors from 1990 on, and to Col. Théoneste Bagosora, widely reputed to be the architect of the Genocide Against the Tutsi.

The night of the crash, French military cooperants who had remained in Rwanda to train the FAR surveyed the wreckage at the crash site with Major Aloys Ntabakuze, the head of the para-commando unit. Days later, Ntabakuze would oversee para-commandos who massacred Tutsi men, women, and children who had taken shelter at the ETO (École technique officielle) in

Kigali (some estimates have the number killed as high as 4,000).

By the morning after the crash, it was clear that preparations for the Genocide were in place. As Jean-Michel Marlaud, the French Ambassador to Rwanda since 1993, was told by Prime Minister-Designate Faustin Twagiramungu, “men of the Presidential Guard were rounding up, kidnapping or assassinating ministers appointed to form the future Government.”

Ambassador Marlaud would later recall, “[o]ther murders were committed” as well, “affect[ing] both members of the opposition parties and Tutsis. They were both political and ethnic killings.”

Following the assassination of many of Rwanda’s most prominent moderate politicians—including the gruesome murder of the Prime Minister, Agathe Uwilingiyimana—extremists formed an interim government on 8 April 1994. In the Élysée, General Christian Quesnot expressed satisfaction with the interim government, noting that “the various Rwandan political parties” were represented “in accordance with the proportions provided for in the Arusha agreements.”

He neglected to mention, however, that representatives came from the Hutu-power wings of each party. Quesnot’s attention was elsewhere : “Only the RPF refused to participate,” he wrote, singling out France’s antagonist. “[The RPF] broke the cease-fire and began an offensive towards Kigali.”

Beginning in the early morning hours of 9 April 1994, the French government sent troops to evacuate French and other foreign nationals. Known as Operation Amaryllis, the mission increased the number of French eyewitnesses to the scenes of unspeakable horror unfolding across Kigali. A military chaplain embedded with Amaryllis would later describe one such scene : The driver of one of the commandos charged with the evacuation [from the French school in Kigali] . . . took a road that bypassed the capital from the west, avoiding the most lively axis of the city. Suddenly, a Tutsi woman, chased by a group of Hutu armed with batons and knives, threw herself against the hood of the first vehicle hoping, in her tragic despair, to find refuge there. The driver braked harshly.

The two occupants did not move, dazed by the event’s complexity. . . . These few moments of hesitation were enough for the Hutu torturers to understand that the French soldiers would not defend the woman. On the way back, the vehicle’s passengers were able to see her corpse, stomach open, lying on the side of the road.

The assassins, with a smile and a friendly wave, kindly acknowledged them.

One of the transport planes that flew this chaplain and his comrades into Kigali reportedly carried with it mortar ammunition for the FAR. (The French government, however, has denied this.) The first plane to evacuate French nationals out of Rwanda also carried, on President Mitterrand's orders, Habyarimana's family—including the first lady and Akazu leader, Agathe Kanziga Habyarimana, about whom Mitterrand would later reportedly exclaim, "She is possessed by the devil, if she could, she would continue to call out for massacres from French radios."

As wholesale targeted slaughter of Tutsi spread throughout Rwanda, the French government failed to exert meaningful pressure on the FAR or the interim government to stop the killings or the hate media broadcasts exhorting people to murder their neighbours. Senior French officials avoided calling the Genocide by its true name for weeks.

In this, they were no worse than the rest of the international community. What did make them worse was, among other things, that French leaders close to President Mitterrand—Gen. Quesnot, Bruno Delaye, and General JeanPierre Huchon, head of the Military Cooperation Mission, in particular—continued to portray the RPF, the only force fighting to end the Genocide, as more of a threat to peace and stability in Rwanda than the génocidaires themselves.

French diplomats at the UN defeated even the mildest of efforts by the international community to hold accountable the interim government. French officials pursued a return to peace negotiations and a cease-fire, which would have precluded the RPF from seizing control of the country and forestalled the defeat of the genocidal interim government. For French policy in Rwanda, the overriding issue was not a coming genocide; it was preventing the RPF from establishing what Mitterrand referred to in June 1994 as a "Tutsiland." That this was Mitterrand's perspective between October 1990 and December 1993 was misguided and destructive. That it remained French policy during the Genocide is unfathomable.

5. When it eventually redeployed troops to Rwanda through Operation Turquoise, the French government used this humanitarian action to stop the RPF from controlling all of Rwanda.

In mid-May 1994, even after France's foreign minister, Alain Juppé, referred to events in Rwanda as a "genocide," Mitterrand insisted that France had no duty to act. "What is this divine decree that made France the soldier of all just causes in the world," he wondered aloud during an 18 May 1994 meeting with French ministers.

However, as May turned into June, several factors prevailed on French officials to seek UN authorization for an intervention. The pressure came in part from French media and the NGO community, which excoriated the French government for its “political responsibilit[y]” in the “systematic extermination,” and from francophone African leaders, who argued that France “needed to act if it was going to retain any credibility in the region.” It did not go unnoticed, either, that the RPF forces were finding success on the battlefield.



A signage is placed where a French flag was flown during ‘Operation Turquoise’ in 1994 at Murambi Genocide Memorial.

This, to French officials, was a concerning development. Through three and a half years and a genocide, France’s ultimate goal of neutralizing the RPF had not changed : “If we fail to keep our word,” a Foreign Ministry source told a reporter, “our credibility vis-à-vis other African states would be seriously damaged and we might see these states turn toward other support.”

In mid-June 1994, French officials resolved to deploy French troops to Rwanda in Operation Turquoise, a mission with, according to France, no goal other than a humanitarian one to “save lives and stop the massacres.”

The UN Security Council approved the resolution drafted by France despite skepticism amongst members about its true motives. Indeed, for Mitterrand, another goal could be achieved. The deployment of French forces would impede the progress of the RPF army, thereby aiding the FAR. Even Jean-Bernard Mérimée, France's UN Ambassador, conceded that this was "an inevitable outcome."

As much as any humanitarian goal, impeding the RPF army was central to President Mitterrand's motivation : "The Tutsis will establish a military dictatorship to impose themselves permanently," Mitterrand told French ministers the day Operation Turquoise began and a day after his military advisors warned him that the RPF might take Kigali before French forces arrived.

"A dictatorship based on ten percent of the population will govern with new massacres," he said. Once again viewing the RPF simplistically as an ethnic, rather than a political, movement, Mitterrand continued to oppose the RPF and to reject the possibility of its success.

French troops arrived in Rwanda "armed like aircraft carriers," but without a clear understanding of the conflict. "Ugandan rebels are invading the country and killing people," one French commander reportedly explained to a subordinate. Gen. Dallaire found that some French officers "refused to accept the reality of the genocide and the fact that the extremist leaders, the perpetrators and some of their old colleagues were all the same people."

Many troops believed that Tutsi were butchering Hutu rather than the opposite. The truth, when it became gruesomely clear, was shocking. "This is not what we were led to believe," one French soldier said in late June, after an encounter with Tutsi survivors of a massacre perpetrated by FAR troops and militias.

The ultimate test of France's intention to save lives arrived at the end of June 1994, in Bisesero, an area in western Rwanda where villagers, acting under the supervision of militia, FAR troops, and gendarmes, had been hunting down and killing Tutsi since April. A French officer, after learning of the danger the Tutsi in Bisesero were facing, promised to return to the region "to get [the survivors] out of there." His superiors, though, were distracted by other priorities : an upcoming visit by François Léotard, the defense minister, and false intelligence that RPF soldiers were in the area—a deception knowingly dispensed by local authorities taking advantage of the gullibility caused by some French commanders' pro-regime bias.

Three days passed before Turquoise troops, under pressure from Western

media, returned to Bisesero. They found the desperate survivors among a sea of corpses. The delay had cost lives.

It was the RPF forces' advance, rather than genocide, that continued to consume Mitterrand and senior officials' attention. Over and over again, officials in Paris blamed the RPF for the emerging humanitarian crisis by arguing its troops' progress was causing Hutu to flee their homes in panic. Delaye and Quesnot argued that, in addition to augmenting its military presence, France should work through diplomatic channels to persuade the RPF "to stop its westward advance," even as they conceded that France, because of its history of backing the FAR, was "not in the best position" to press for a cease-fire.

"We cannot publicly take the initiative to achieve a cease-fire," wrote Ambassador Marlaud, who shared the Élysée advisors' view, "because we would be suspected of attempting to halt the situation under the guise of humanitarian action."

Col. Didier Tuzin, who, in 1993, had commanded a secret French military operation in Rwanda, during which, by his own account, he had effectively directed all FAR operations on the front against the RPF, was still seething with undisguised hatred for the RPF when he returned to Rwanda in June 1994 with Turquoise. Tuzin hoped that Paris would give his troops the green light "to attack the evil at its root : the RPF!" One Turquoise officer has claimed that France did, indeed, authorize air strikes against the RPF troops, only to scrap the plan at the last minute.

This account is corroborated by a former senior FAR commander who has said that French officers pressed him for intelligence on RPF troop positions for air strikes, and by contemporaneous RPF reports about "intercepted French communications" indicating that French planes planned to bomb RPF military installations.

When the French government assessed, in early July, that the RPF army, which was on the verge of taking Kigali, was likely to keep chasing the FAR to Rwanda's borders with Zaire, the Mitterrand administration directed Turquoise troops to establish a "Safe Humanitarian Zone" (SHZ), to, as Ambassador Marlaud put it on 1 July 1994, "deter the RPF from going too far."

France, however, informed the UN that the purpose of the SHZ was to shelter civilians fleeing the RPF advance. The French government established the SHZ on 4 July 1994, the same day the RPF liberated Kigali. The SHZ covered much of the territory controlled by the interim government and kept

one-fifth of the country off limits to the RPF. (The initial French plan would have “cut the country in two,” effectively preserving half of Rwanda for the génocidaires.)

In practice, the SHZ became a safe haven for génocidaires. There, French military neither systematically confiscated their weapons nor detained génocidaires despite evidence of their crimes. Many of the Genocide’s perpetrators, including the interim government’s leaders, used this cover to flee to Zaire. French officers not only allowed them to do so, but made arrangements for their safe passage.

In Zaire, Turquoise officers met with génocidaires and offered guidance on how they could regroup and “reconquer the country.” There is also evidence that French officials secretly funneled weapons to the ex-FAR in Zaire, and, according to a French journalist, a confidential Élysée document confirms that the French government ordered Turquoise officers to rearm the “Hutu who were crossing the border [to Zaire—ed.]” Despite specific requests received on 20 December 2019, 10 July 2020, and 27 January 2021 covering this and other topics, the French government has not released this document or any others that would illuminate these allegations.

The final weeks of Turquoise laid bare its inadequacies as a humanitarian mission. An operation designed to project military strength proved ill-suited to the very different humanitarian crisis that emerged in the Genocide’s wake, as disease and starvation ravaged refugee communities. French Prime Minister Édouard Balladur’s assessment was Orwellian : “Today,” he declared on 20 July, “we can say that Operation ‘Turquoise’ has succeeded.” A month later, French troops finally left Rwanda.

When the last French soldiers finally departed Rwanda on 21 August, they left a land and people destroyed and devastated. As a report written for the OAU later noted : The consequences of French policy can hardly be overestimated. The escape of génocidaire leaders into Zaire led, almost inevitably, to a new, more complex stage in the Rwandan tragedy, expanding it into a conflict that soon engulfed all of central Africa. That the entire Great Lakes Region would suffer destabilization was both tragic and, to a significant extent, foreseeable.

The French military’s brief foray achieved little good. Few lives were saved, relative to those lost in the Genocide. And the area further deteriorated, as génocidaires and FAR troops were given the opportunity to fight another day.