

Africa

Germany's role in Rwanda's genocide : See no evil, hear no evil ?

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Deutsche Welle, June 17, 2015

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On April 6, 1994, the plane carrying Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana was shot down by unknown militants. His death would mark the beginning of Rwanda's genocide in which radicalized Hutu militia gangs slaughtered around 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

Signs that tensions between Hutus and Tutsis could escalate existed long before that date. In an investigative report written in 1999 on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Jürgen Wolff and Andreas Mehler strongly

criticized German politicians for failing to act. "The very fact that despite numerous warning signs, the German side was completely surprised by the outbreak of the civil war and the genocide, indicates some serious deficits in conflict detection and flow of information," the authors wrote.

When confronted with the question why Germany failed to act, the answer has always been : "Response requires knowledge - and the latter was missing. This is partly due to the non-disclosure of information that existed at that time."

Germany's presence in Rwanda

The Federal Republic of Germany was very active in the tiny African country. In addition to the German embassy, the German Development Agency (DED) and the German Technical Cooperation Agency (GTZ) – today known as the German Society for Inter-

national Cooperation (GIZ), were involved in a number of projects across the country.

Since 1976, Germany's defense forces, the Bundeswehr, maintained close contacts with Rwanda.



A Rwandan Patriotic Front soldier stands guard in front of a church in Kigali. President Kagame's Rwanda's Patriotic Front (RPF) is credited for ending the genocide in July 1994. Alexander Joe/AFP/Getty Images

Berlin picked Rwanda as one of the beneficiaries for military equipment in an aid program for foreign forces. An advisory group of the Bundeswehr was also on the ground and it worked closely with the Rwandan military.

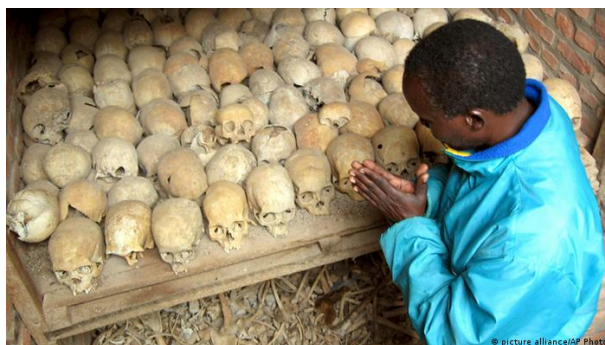
As early as October 1990, the security situation in Rwanda deteriorated. The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) led by Tutsi rebel leader Paul Kagame was marching towards Rwanda from Uganda. Testimonies in the country pointed to an escalation as Pastor Jörg Zimmermann who lived in Rwanda from 1991 to 1994, recalled. "The fact that it blew up, is an understatement" said Zimmermann. Raids, shellings, targeted killings : "The atrocities took proportions that even the traditional Rwanda did not know before."

Warnings to the German Embassy

Zimmermann regularly sent a circular letter to hundreds of recipients in Germany. The priest who speaks Kinyarwanda, monitored local media reports by reading Kangura, [A local magazine that stoked ethnic hatred ahead of the genocide]. Zimmermann also heard the hate speech against the Tutsi being spread on radio station RTLM.

He forwarded his impressions and assessments to the German ambassador. In one of his letters, dated February 1994, he stated : "In a recent issue, Kangura has even predicted the assassination of the president in March 1994. It's unimaginable what would occur if something were to happen to Habyarimana."

From the autumn of 1993 it became increasingly obvious that a catastrophe in Rwanda was imminent.



A man gives his respects at Nyamata, Rwanda's genocide memorial in Kigali

Some 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were murdered in 100 days

Reinhard Bolz, who had worked for GTZ as a government adviser since 1989, experienced the harrowing events up close. "In 1993, it went to the extent that our security guards were being killed. It was believed that members of the military or the Interahamwe youth militia were responsible."

Bolz and his colleagues frequently reported such incidents to the German Embassy and the Ministry for Development (BMZ). "We requested that the BMZ should discuss the situation at the next intergovernmental talks. To make it clear that we could not tolerate such a thing, and that we would have to evacuate should there be more violence and no end to the killing of our staff. We repeatedly expressed the wish to send a strong political signal."

Indifferent attitude

Nothing happened. Neither the reports of the priest, claims by staff of the GTZ, aid workers or members of the Bundeswehr persuaded Berlin to respond to the events unfolding in Rwanda. Even worse, there was no information about the threat in embassy documents. The radical Hutu Interahamwe youth

gang was mentioned for the first time at the beginning of April 1994.

Germany took refuge behind a common European stance on Rwanda which never really existed. The German Ambassador to Rwanda at that time, Dieter Hölscher, is still mystified by the scale of the genocide. "One could not tell, it was always far from the capital [Kigali], we only heard of incidents in which people had died but not on the massive scale as later became apparent," Hölscher said.

Photo : Germany's Foreign Minister Frank Walter-Steinmeier speaks in parliament, seated on the left Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Despite numerous debates, Germany's role in Rwanda's genocide remains unclear

Official German records on the events of the Rwandan genocide are not available. Documents, reports and other data from this period can be found neither at the Defense Department nor the headquarters of GIZ, the successor organization of GTZ and DED.

Recently, the Alliance 90 / Greens and the Left opposition parties called on Germany's parliament to re-examine events in Rwanda. Their request is being considered by the Human Rights Committee.