

Interview Koffi Annan

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He is secretary-general of the United Nations and in 1994 headed the U.N.'s small office on peacekeeping operations. In this interview, he explains how Rwanda "became a victim of the Somali peacekeeping experience and he talks about some of the controversial decisions he made during the crisis. He also discusses the reasons behind the world's failure to act, including the U.N.'s "lacking a culture of speaking out" and member states "not having the will" to intervene. As to whether the world's response to genocide will be any different next time, he is skeptical. "I really don't know. I wish I can say yes, but I am not convinced that we will see the kind of political will and the action required to stop it." Secretary-General Annan is now involved in a global effort to set a new standard for the world on humanitarian intervention. This

interview conducted on Feb. 17, 2004.

Personally for you, where does Rwanda sit – inside, emotionally?

It was a very painful and traumatic experience, for me personally, and I think, in some way, for the United Nations. It's not something that you forget. It's an experience that, if you go through, becomes part of you, and part of your whole experience as a human being. You will also notice that since then, I have been trying to push very hard for the international community, not only to learn from the lessons, but try and take steps that will make sure we don't repeat Rwanda.

The decision to go in, and the size of the U.N. force that was sent in there— In retrospect, what did you really know about the situation in Rwanda?

I think when you look back and you look at the mandate that the force was given, it was to help the parties honor their ceasefire agreements

and to help them implement the agreements they have signed. There was a lot of expectation on the parties to honor the commitments they have done with the peacekeepers assisting them. So they went in with a limited mandate and a limited capacity.

In retrospect, perhaps we did not fully understand the complexities of the situation we were dealing with. And, of course, when the [Rwandan president's] plane was shot down, everything began to unravel. I think we also have to accept the fact that the [U.N.] force was mainly in Kigali, and not in the rest of the country. So we seemed to have information about what was going on in Kigali, but really did not have a sense of what was going on in other parts of the country or the driving force behind some of these hatreds and the tensions and the animosity.

Perhaps if we had understood it fully, we would have structured the force differently and made greater demands on the members; not that [they would have been accepted], because we have to understand this was coming in soon after Somalia, where after the troops were killed, everybody left. All the countries withdrew and left after the U.S. left, and we were closing down the mission with the feeling in some capitals that we are not going to get involved in Africa again.

So to some extent, Rwanda became a victim of the Somalia experience. In fact, it took us several years to get non-African troops to come back into peacekeeping operations in Africa. Now some of them are back, but it has taken all that long.

The warning fax that came in from General Dallaire, did you see it? What was your response?

I think the fax [Read this Jan. 11, 1994 fax] came in, and General Dallaire had also been in touch on the phone with General Baril [in the U.N.'s DPKO]. In fact, [Dallaire] had sent other messages, where sometimes he questioned that "Somebody came and gave me this information. I don't know how sincere it is, whether I am being manipulated or not," because intelligence cannot be used to manipulate you; and knowing also the situation in the Security Council, that we were discussing this in the council.

Let's not kid each other. Some council members knew more than we did from their own intelligence system and their own embassies on the ground. So the idea was to really, first of all, act very quickly. The assistant secretary-general was dealing with that, and I had my hands full at that time also with Yugoslavia. We had Yugoslavia, and we had Rwanda.

The decision was to ensure that the Rwandan government knows that

we have been tipped off and we knew what was in planning, and they should not proceed. The information was also shared with the ambassadors of the key countries – the U.S., France, Belgium, and all of them – for them to go and reinforce that message with the [Rwandan] government to make sure that they do not move, that we know what is happening, that they should not make any attempt in that direction.

Why did we go that route? Often, shining light on [such things] and telling those planning it at the governmental level [in Rwanda] that the international community knows what is being planned– “We are monitoring, we are going to deal with you harshly, and we know what you are up to,” sometimes it is a very good deterrent. Quite frankly, we had no other option, because we knew this mood in the council. You are not going to get them to say, “We are going to send in the brigade.” We are not going to rush in to send reinforcements to General Dallaire and his men to stop this.

Therefore, one had to use the avenues available to try and put pressure and nip the problem in the bud. It didn’t work, and it was really a painful experience for all of us who were involved in this.

Just for the record, how important, historically, is that one particular fax?

It was important in the sense that

it was an alarm that General Dallaire received and sent forward. But it was part of a whole series of information. I don’t think, in this kind of situation, information only comes from that one source. Governments have their intelligence systems. They have their embassies on the ground. They have their consulates and networks on the ground. In fact, in some cases they even had better networks than we had.

So it was part of an information system, which should have left the indication that a lot is going to happen. ... There was a whole series of events and discussions in the council.

Let me just ask you, General Dallaire says he felt like, at the time, his credibility was being questioned.

Romeo was a very conscientious officer, very energetic, a great leader of his men. ... I wouldn’t say that his judgment was questioned. But he sometimes made requests or demands for additional resources. Those of us at headquarters who knew the situation in the council and the possibility of whether he will get it or not sometimes were the ones who had to tell him that “You are not going to get this.” But that was not challenging his judgment. It was indicating what he is likely to get, what was possible and what was not.

I don’t think, in the end, we were proven wrong. Not only weren’t we

proven wrong, but even when the killing really started and everybody knew, he didn't get reinforcements. Planes were leaving, soldiers went in – not to support him, but to withdraw their nationals. So I hope he doesn't see it as questioning– But I could see when you are on the ground and you say, "I need this and I need that," and you are fighting almost a war and in a warlike situation, you expect support ; you expect to get what you need.

The instructions to the U.N. force there in Rwanda to shoot only if fired upon – what was the rationale behind that ?

That's a good question. You will recall I have referred to Somalia before, when the U.S. was fully deployed with the others. There was a force of about 37,000. Then when the U.N. took over, we went down to about 28,000. Then when the killing started, when the 18 troops were killed and eventually a U.S. soldier was dragged through the streets, quite a lot of the governments decided to withdraw their troops. In the end, we had to close the mission. We had 28,000 there compared with several hundred that we had in Rwanda, and even with that number, they withdrew, because some peacekeepers were killed.

We were concerned, one, that Dallaire and his force didn't have the capacity to take on that sort of responsibility ; that if they attempted to do

it and any of the peacekeepers were killed, we may see a repeat of Somalia. We may not even be able to offer any assistance to the Rwandans or even have, any eyes and ears of the international community down there. So we had to be very careful to make sure that his force doesn't suffer the same fate as Somalia and be unable [to] offer any assistance. Unfortunately, that also happened. When the 10 Belgian soldiers were killed, the force was reduced by half. He was left with barely over 200 men to do the work.

So these are some of the considerations that went with it. Not that one had no respect or sensitivity or sympathy for those at risk ; he was subsequently authorized to intervene on a case-by-case basis, where they think they can make a difference. But not through his limited force for that kind of mission, because we were concerned that the governments would withdraw them, as happened in Somalia.

We are looking at the U.N. council vote to withdraw. The drawdown goes directly to the question of political will.

Yes, yes. In fact, you remember one of the options was to boost up the force to 5,500, or withdraw it altogether, or draw down. The secretary-general indicated his preference was to boost the force up to 5,500. But the will wasn't there.

Where wasn't the will ?

The member states did not have the will. The member states did not have the will. I don't know if you saw the statements that have been made by Mrs. Albright indicating that she had her instructions. And Richard Holbrooke – was it January? No, December. His statement in Kigali saying that, "My government didn't want to get involved." And the U.N. doesn't have any troops; we borrow them from governments.

So the lesson there is that when these things happen, any action requires ultimately that the political will exist?

It requires a political will. Without that will, there is very little you can do, whether it's in Srebrenica or in Rwanda. But that does not mean that those of us in the Secretariat, the secretary-general, the senior officials, do not have a role, because we need to be able to press governments to do as much as we can.

I recall on the Rwanda thing, we approached about 80 governments, trying to get offers of troops, and they wouldn't give them to us. I remember making a statement – which people thought was very insulting – that I'm not even getting them from the African governments, and what are they holding their troops for? Is it just to intimidate their own population, which happens in some situations, and not making them available for this sort of an operation?

Your predecessor, Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, said in an interview that, during all this time, the DPKO [U.N. Department of Peacekeeping Operations] was largely under the influence of the Americans. What's your response to that?

I don't know if it is entirely right. They were big players. They showed keen interest in peacekeeping operations, for several reasons. One, from a budgetary point of view, where they were paying about 27 percent-plus of the costs, they were also anxious to see what happens. After Somalia, they became very engaged in the peacekeeping operations, because they were putting all these forces in Somalia and were also going to hand it over to the U.N. to withdraw. [They] wanted to make sure that the U.N. has the capacity to maintain and support that force. So there was very keen interest. In that sense, he was right.

But I think the leadership of the U.N. also had a responsibility. I reported to the secretary. I took my orders from him, and not from the Americans. But the interest in making sure that there was something in the U.N. to be able to take over Somalia, and at that time dealing with Bosnia – It was accurate that there was very keen U.S. involvement.

A number of people who have talked to us say that, in retrospect, there was one incident,

or one conversation, or maybe one television story or something they saw – and that it was then, it was that moment that they realized that what was happening in Rwanda was something of a different magnitude. Was there a moment like that for you?

I would say the moment for me, which was extremely difficult to comprehend and to accept, was when it was clear to everybody how dangerous the situation is – the killings that were going on and were about to happen, and we couldn't get the troops. We couldn't get the governments to move. For me, that was the most incomprehensible. ... Shouldn't the fact that the killing was taking place and we knew and we were sending planes to remove others to safety – [Shouldn't that] have moved us to act? That insensitivity to the human condition and the plight of others – Perhaps this was the one thing that shook me more than anything else.

How did that change you, afterwards?

It makes you more determined to speak out, to press, to try and see if you can work with others to put in systems that will, if not shame the governments, at least allow the organization to move a bit more. This is one of the reasons why I have been pressing this whole idea of the responsibility to protect – quicker deployment

of U.N. forces, using our standby arrangements better, getting other governments to sign on to participate in peacekeeping operations, trying to convince the European and the Western countries to go back into peacekeeping and to support it, whether in Africa or elsewhere.

Then when you are faced with the question – which I was last month in Stockholm at the genocide conference – whether I think that we can avoid the Rwandas of tomorrow, and that if we were to be confronted with a new Rwanda, is the world ready to do it? Will the world move in to stop it? And my answer is, I really don't know. I wish I can say yes, but I am not convinced that we will see the kind of political will and the action required to stop it.

So my message to lead people in these conflict situations is for them to work with each other, and work with friends to find a way of avoiding or diffusing these conflicts before they get to that stage, because I am not sure that if you were to have a second Rwanda that the world will be ready to move, even if they have all the information.

But is this not a different approach to traditional states, nation-states? What exactly are you and others saying when they talk about the responsibility of protecting? What does that mean for a country's sove-

reignty ?

It's a difficult concept for this United Nations, which is an organization of sovereign states, an organization that respects national sovereignty. But as I said in my statement to the General Assembly as far back as 1999, governments must not be allowed to use sovereignty as a shield to systematically deny their people of human rights and undertake gross systematic abuses of human rights. If that were to happen, shouldn't the international community have some responsibility of going in to assist these people?

The Canadian Commission, a commission which was set up by the Canadian government, took the concept further, and in fact gave it a better diplomatic name than I had. I had referred to humanitarian intervention, and they took up "responsibility to protect" – that the governments have responsibility to protect their people, and where they fail or show unwillingness to do that or are incapable of doing it, that responsibility may fall on the international community and the membership at large, the world community, to do something about it.

It is not a concept that is easily accepted by everybody. But I hope this will be one of the topics that the panel I have set up to look at the challenges, threats that we face, and to come up with recommendations will

look at this issue. They will look at the issue of when this intervention is legitimate, who decides under what rules, under what circumstances. If they do come up with the right answers that the membership embraces, it might help us deal with the Rwandas of tomorrow.

When I've talked to a lot of people, a lot of them raise the same point you do in the context of Rwanda. The die was, in many ways, cast before April 6, and once it began, not just the U.N, [but] the embassies left – everyone left. The Red Cross stayed. A small U.N. presence stayed. And the people who stayed and who spoke out and acted – even trying to still maintain, like the Red Cross, a certain neutrality – had a big impact. One of the lessons a lot of people have been talking about has been the responsibility to speak out when these things happen. Can you speak to that?

Yes. I think it is important to speak out. We didn't have that culture in this U.N. We've improved. We've improved. At that time, we were very cautious about dealing with the press, what we said to the press. It was only the secretary-general's office and the spokesman of the press who spoke. We are better, but we could still get better and speak to the press and open up.

I think it is not just the U.N. speaking, but the concept of a third

party, a third party to a conflict speaking out, you know, sometimes saying, "Stop, this is enough. This cannot be allowed to happen," gives the victims and the people who are caught in that situation courage, encouragement, support. It [shows] that somebody cares. Sometimes it even gives them courage to resist and to fight and to protect.

So the third party has a very important role we should never underestimate, not only in speaking out trying to get help, but it also gives inspiration and the strength to those who are caught in that situation. It is something that we are beginning to do more and more of, but we don't do enough. I don't think it is only the U.N. who should speak out. The press should speak out. Other governments, NGOs and others – we should all speak out. We have improved since Rwanda, but I think we can still do better.

Just personally– Your regrets, thoughts, 10 years on?

Ten years on– I really wish I could have found a way, some way of getting more help to them. I could have found a way of convincing the member states that we need to send in a larger force because there were counterforces. Yes, there were governments who were pleading for everybody to withdraw, to pull everybody out, and we are going to repeat Somalia and all that. But I wish I had

been able to reach out.

I wish I had been able to galvanize this membership and the member states to act, or at least to get them to have a genuine debate, open genuine debate as to whether they should go or not. But, of course, that is also difficult when the council meets behind closed doors and only comes to the public to vote. So the positions they take, the arguments that are made are not known to the public. Even what one says to them is not known to the public.

Of course, as I said, the culture was such that you don't go behind them and speak to the press or leak things to the press. In fact, somebody asked me, "What do you think would have happened if that letter from Dallaire had been leaked to the press?" Why didn't one leak it to the press? You know, maybe it would have made a difference. But as I said, we are not very good at dealing with the press, and the culture was not there.

Is there is anything else you want to say?

No, I think the only other thing that I will say is, while it is important for us to think about how the world will respond to some of these situations, tragic ethnic cleansing or genocidal situations, I think I would also want to send a message to societies around the world, societies on the verge of conflict. They need to find a way of dialoguing with each other, of

talking to each other and reconciling and avoid situations where they turn on each other and begin to kill each other, whether with guns, with machetes or with whatever. Because the world may not come to their aid.

Therefore, they should avoid situations where they turn on each other and then sit back and say, "But what happened to the world? Why didn't they come? Why have we been left alone?" I will pray that we don't get to that situation and to find out whether they will come or will not come.

So I appeal to them to show sensitivity, to respect the sanctity of life, the dignity of each other. Even though they may belong to different tribes and different religions and different regions of the country, they don't have to detest the other side, other person, so much to [be] like themselves. They should find a way of living together in their countries and avoid the sort of slaughters we have seen. It is better for them to go that route, than hope that if it happens next time, the world will come. Why must there be a next time?