

Never Again



FROM RWANDA TO DARFUR: “NEVER AGAIN” OR “NEVER SAY NEVER AGAIN”?

*By YAV KATSHUNG JOSEPH**

April marks the 13th anniversary of the start of the genocide in Rwanda during which approximately 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed in 100 days. When celebrating the anniversary of this horrific tragedy lets take a moment of our time not only to remember those who were slaughtered so unmercifully, more attention should be focused on how to prevent future heinous crimes to occur in Africa and elsewhere.

‘Never Again’ – An international commitment or a rhetorical sound bite?

After the horrors of the Holocaust, the international community drafted the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and pledged "never again" should such evil strike humanity. The United Nations itself was founded with one of its objectives that humanity should be spared forever the scourge of war. The pledge proved empty as numerous heinous crimes followed. In fact, civilians in Africa bear the heaviest brunt of acts of terror, civil wars, violent suppression of political opponents and criminal violence.

The most glaring and heinous examples of the failure of civilian protection in Africa are among others the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) between 1998 and 2003, which resulted in one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, with over 3.4 million persons displaced from their homes and an estimated 4 million killed¹ and, the Darfur conflict that started in 2003, with estimates of numbers killed range from 180,000 to 400,000. At least two million people have been forced to flee from their homes and are displaced in Sudan or in camps in neighbouring countries. These cases and many more, are particularly relevant: they happened in our lifetimes and continue to happen now.

Never Say Never Again?

These cases are a tragic part of Africa's contemporary history and one can easily say that the phrase "never again" has lost its meaning and simply signifies a lamentable "*never say never again.*" While Rwanda was supposedly the scar on our conscience that would be the last incident of mass atrocities allowed to occur, it provided only a foreshadowing of things to come. That is true especially in Africa where, despite leaders' pledge to never let another Rwanda happen again, they have not demonstrated the will to exercise the African Union's right to intervene to stem gross human rights violations in either a concerted or consistent manner. Even if there is controversy on the notion of genocide in Darfur, one could reasonably argue that, there is little doubt that despite the hair-splitting of the proper description of the unfolding tragedy, there is a developing genocide in Darfur with a similar reaction or lack of action from the world community.² Equally, the current situation in Zimbabwe - where the state is oppressing its own people - is another case to put on the agenda of actions to end this cycle and move us to finally realize the call – "Never again".

As April 7 has been designated by the UN as "International day of reflection on the genocide in Rwanda", the profound sense of the "Never Again" phrase should be reflected in *how to prevent heinous crimes and other violations of human rights and how to act should such violations occur*. Prevention of such crimes through swift and

¹ See International Rescue Committee "Mortality in the DRC: Results from a Nationwide Survey", April 2003.

² *Agence France Presse (AFP)*, Nigeria's president says 'genocide' developing in Darfur, at: www.afp/20061010/wl_afp/sudandarfurnigeria

effective action will send us a clear message and maybe, thus inspired, we can someday make “Never Again!” more than a mere slogan.

In so doing, the responses to protect civilians would immensely benefit from President Paul Kagame’s sagacious words:

*Never again should the international community’s response to these crimes be found wanting. Let us resolve to take collective actions in a timely and decisive manner. Let us also commit to put in place early warning mechanisms and ensure that preventive interventions are the rule rather than the exception.*³

To achieve the broad goal expressed in this message, it will certainly take more than mere rhetoric. Political commitment must be expressed, not only in establishing the required mechanisms but also in triggering them to act when action is required. The case of Darfur aptly demonstrates the futility of establishing legal regimes which cannot be effectively utilised. In providing for intervention in internal affairs of member states when massive human rights violations are perpetrated without action from the government concerned, or when the government itself is involved in such atrocities, the Constitutive Act of the African Union has codified an important principle of international law. The principle, as alluded to above holds that while states have the responsibility to protect their citizens in recognition of their sovereignty, the default responsibility falls upon the international community, in this case the AU, which can intervene to forestall the atrocities.

The case of Darfur and now Zimbabwe are the latest in a string of similar situations to pose unanswered questions to our rhetorical commitments. It is one thing for the silence we enjoy in our assurance of “Never Again” to be ruptured for lack of preventive mechanisms, but it is another for our deafening silence in the face of continuing atrocities. Empty diplomatic gestures without concrete action in places like Darfur, long recognised as ‘the world’s worst humanitarian crisis’⁴ is a damning indictment to the international community, in particular the leading nations at the global and continental level.

³ 2005 World Summit Excerpts on Responsibility to Protect, at : www.reformtheun.org

⁴ UN General-Secretary Kofi Annan

As the world commemorates the commencement of the tragic events of 1994 in Rwanda, our leadership and those who shape opinion and policy must rethink our commitment to a world and continent free of human suffering, a continent committed to furthering the aspiration to live in peaceful world, a world in which human life and dignity are embedded in state policy and interactions between nations. This would allow us, when necessary, to discard parochial notions of sovereignty to act accordingly when another Rwanda or Darfur threatens.

To achieve this, we must bring the institutions we have established and collective powers to construct a world in which 'Never Again' means what it should.

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