POLITICAL SCIENCE UNDERGRADUATE REVIEW

VOL. 2 Winter 2016 ARTICLE 13

# A Re-Examination of Humanitarian Intervention in Light of the Rwanda Genocide

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*This paper explores the Rwanda Genocide of 1994 and the lack of global response that was given to the atrocities committed against Rwandans. In light of the failure to act, the paper examines why this occurred and proposes a multi-national response to large-scale violence in the global community.*

The topic of humanitarian intervention has long been contentious in the realm of international politics. Deciding whether or not to intervene in instances of strife and, if so, how, is fraught with debate. One of the reasons that this is so is because there is no over-arching policy prescribed for humanitarian intervention. I do not believe that the question of humanitarian intervention should be an unequivocal yes or no. The issue is complex and each situation is unique. While there can be no one policy for humanitarian intervention that fits every situation, there should at least be a competent organization, or a coalition of organizations, that are responsible for assessing each situation. Through the course of this paper, I will examine the concept of motivation that is an inherent part of humanitarian intervention as it relates to the Rwanda Genocide. When this blight is examined closely, it becomes apparent that humanitarian intervention should be a joint effort between the UN, global organizations, and regional organizations. This collaboration would mitigate the risk of any one entity acting unilaterally and reduces the risk of non-action by a single body due to political motivations.

The staggering loss of lives in Rwanda over a period of one hundred days in the spring of 1994 will forever be remembered by the international community as an embarrassment and as an utter failure of humanity. As the country descended further into civil war and animosities towards the Tutsi escalated, global governments neglected to act, even when confronted with evidence that violence was imminent. In fact, as Jared Cohen writes in his book, *One Hundred Days of Silence: America and the Rwanda Genocide*, as early as January 1993, "the CIA had warned of a likelihood of large-scale ethnic violence" (28). Furthermore, he writes, "policymakers received information from a variety of sources, both Rwandan and UN, concerning arms caches, distribution of arms to civilians, and the existence of extremist anti-Tutsi militias" (31). In the face of such damning evidence, one may beg the question of why there was no response or call to action from the global community. Exacerbating the issue was not just the lack of response, but also the fact that the US, Belgium, and France all withdrew the few forces they had lent to the UN mandate in Rwanda as the genocide began (Burkholter and Pocar 43). This blatant

betrayal of Rwanda reveals where the Western nations' political priorities lay. Their chief concern was to save their own people at the expense of hundreds of thousands of Rwandan lives. Indeed, Burkholter and Pocar write, "that the US government avoided opportunities to save even a few Rwandans or engage in even small diplomatic measures to stigmatize the genocide regime, as if such activities would be seen as shameful in the light of killing so many" (42).

The fact of the matter, though, is that genocide is a threat that impacts all global citizens. To stand by as a group of people is indiscriminately slaughtered exhibits a certain kind of callousness. On the other hand, one may argue, the resources, both financial and in terms of personnel, required for a humanitarian intervention are staggering. Cristina Badescu concurs, saying that "the costs and risk of lives for personnel involved in any intervention makes it politically imperative for the intervening state to claim a certain degree of "self-interest" to convince its citizenry of the appropriateness of such operations" (57). Here, then, we see the confluence of political motivations and the risks and benefits of intervention. To place the responsibility of a humanitarian mandate on any one particular state is to ensure that the intervention fails. The cost of human lives is a huge burden for any one state to bear. Corroborating this is the fact that states simply do not act if there is no benefit to them. In the case of Rwanda, the US in particular refused to acknowledge that a genocide was being committed because to do so would have obligated them to act as a party to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Burkhalter and Pocar 41). There was no benefit to the US to intervene in Rwanda and after having suffered a great loss of personnel in Somalia only six months previous, the perceived risk was heightened.

In the absence of a global policy for humanitarian intervention, it is time that this aspect of international politics be re-examined and a reformation of sorts take place. We have already see how the refusal of one nation to intervene can be detrimental. The challenge facing humanitarian intervention is how to alleviate any one nation of the task of intervention and truly make it a global effort. It should be a multi-faceted endeavour that encompasses at least several nations and the resources of those nations. Daniele Archibugi contends that when it comes to the question of humanitarian interventions, "the more these interventions are self-assessed by single states, the more likely they are to be self-interested and, consequently, the less likely they will be humanitarian" (8). Left to act on their own, single states are more likely to intervene when there is a motivation for something other than simply assisting others. Unfortunately, the humanitarian aspect then becomes merely a stepping stone towards a bigger, politically-driven goal and those who pay the price are ultimately the ones who are in need of intervention in the first place. This was clearly the case in Rwanda, when the US government was motivated more by reducing their own loss of personnel and less about the fate of the Rwandans.

While the UN's Security Council is a primary player in cases of uprisings and mass violence, regional organizations are a strong counter to the lack of motivation to act that plague some nations. These organizations are close (or closer) to the unstable nation or nations and as such, anything that occurs in the unstable area will have a greater impact on those nations that border or have stronger ties with that country. Their motivation for acting will be greater simply because violent uprisings or the threat of genocide is a more immediate threat to them. Organizations like these would be an invaluable liaison for any international group and nation debating whether or not intervention is required. Not only would their greater sense of urgency provide a useful foil to nations who are less eager to intervene, but these groups

possess a greater knowledge of the situation and of the details involved with the strife and any potential aid. As Badescu writes, "it is clear that states bordering on a war zone have strong interests in resolving the conflict (in addition to humanitarian concerns) and therefore will be likely to take action. Regional organizations may be better than the UN because they are familiar with the intricacies of the local situations and actors" (69).

While intervention could be improved with a greater involvement from varying organizations, it is useless if a country or a government is absolutely opposed to intervention. In such cases as these, intervention could possibly do more harm than good, even if a nation's people are already suffering. Humanitarian intervention should not be carried out in situations where intervening would knowingly do more harm than good. Darfur, for example, has been unstable for a long time. However, "the central government in Khartoum has constantly refused to allow non-African troops into the region, threatening that Darfur would become a 'graveyard' for any multinational force sent without its consent" (Badescu 72). As it pertains to Rwanda, there appears to have been no such warning issued from the country to the Western nations. There is always a risk of providing any sort of aid or intervention in areas of unrest, however there was nothing to indicate that troops would have faced a higher than normal risk.

Taking this information and evidence into consideration, I believe that humanitarian intervention is a global responsibility and to fail to act when a genocide is imminent is a failure not only to the country and people in crisis, but to the global population as a whole. However, intervention that is driven solely or largely by one nation runs the risk of losing its humanitarian focus. Instead, intervention should be decided by a collective of nations, not least of whom should be nations who are closest to the violence and can provide thoughtful insights and recommendations. The only instance in which taking action would be imprudent is in cases where the evidence is explicit that more harm than good would be done if intervention were to take place than if things were just left alone.

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