

25 Years since genocide: How life comes full circle

Twenty-five years ago the last genocide of the 20th century was perpetrated before our eyes. At the time, just as today, the life of an African, and particularly that of blacks, had little value in the eyes of the world. So the world looked indifferently as innocent souls were being slaughtered for the simple reason that they were born Tutsi.

The indifference should not surprise us if we consider that the world we are referring to is a world in which Africa still has no meaningful voice or no voice at all, neither in the UN Security Council, nor in the elaboration of the rules that govern it. In that world, Africans were not meant to survive. Hence, the indifference of those who are meant to survive, who refer to themselves as the “international community.”

What is striking, however, is how those who are not meant to survive – the Africans – harbor this sentiment and express it by showing little respect for the lives of their peers and in turn end up showing self-contempt, as if they view themselves through the lenses of François Mitterrand. This is the French president and main supporter of the genocidal government in 1994 who, amidst the carnage he had helped to set alight, shared in a private conversation the idea that: “Genocide in those countries is not a serious matter.”

François Mitterrand suggested two things. The first is that the annihilation of a people in Africa cannot move the world; his world as well as ours. The second is that Africans slaughtering other Africans was a trivial and recurring story. In his understanding, barbarism and savagery are characteristics inherent to the Black People. This is also the main argument justifying the crime against humanity – that preceded, and in some places like Namibia and Congo, coincided

with genocide proper – that is colonization: “Colonizers were there to civilize the savages”.

Understanding how some Africans, including our leaders, view and value their people is paramount. In some instances this view perpetuates the savage narrative and the logic of the international indifference noted above and explains, in part, why not a single neighboring country attempted to create, at least, a humanitarian corridor for the thousands of Tutsi refugees who were trying to flee from the genocidal axe.

On the contrary, the French and Mobutu of Zaire saw value in creating a “humanitarian corridor” for genocide perpetrators.

Some Africans have argued that intervening in an internal conflict goes against international norms. Does such an argument soothe our consciences? For one thing, a conflict assumes two or more adversaries in disagreement. Secondly, Genocide is not a civil war. There are not two sides fighting each other. A government and its militias that attempt to exterminate an entire section of the population constitutes aggression without an adversary. In other words, the very existence of the Tutsi is what constituted an adversary in 1994.

Consequently, the inaction of African elites and African governments to the genocidal view that the mere existence of the Tutsi was a problem that needed uprooting from society will remain as an indelible stain to the generation that could have placed a challenge to this view. They chose to domesticate the Miterrandian view in the localized form that genocides to compatriots don't matter.

During one of his speeches on the subject, President Paul Kagame returned to this indifference underscoring that the same elites and heads of governments rush to Paris to pay respect to the victims of terrorist attacks (and they should) but nobody is moved when similar or worse tragedies occur in

Africa.

The lesson from his speech is that even with the indifference of 1994, the expectation should be that Africans have learned a lesson in solidarity. Genocide commemoration is not about Rwanda, per se. It's not Rwanda that has created destiny with genocide. On the contrary, to commemorate the genocide of the Tutsi is to raise awareness in Rwanda and beyond so that "Never again" should cease to be a slogan, to nudge it towards becoming a human reality.

Strictly, it is to awaken Africans to the indifference of the "international community" in ways that set alight to their own sensibilities, to invite them to reflect on the dangers of exploiting ethnicity and other forms of systematic exclusion for political gains. To reflect on RTLM (Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines) as a reminder that freedom of speech and expression should never be abused to harm others. Words have meaning. And words have killed before.

Whether in Niger, Ethiopia, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, South Africa, Burundi, or Kenya, ethnic politics and hate speech whether aimed at foreigners or fellow compatriots, endanger national, regional and continental peace and security. It's a slippery slope to far worse.

For the little anecdote, I am a Burundian. When I fled my country in 2015, Rwanda offered me asylum. Twenty-five years ago, my family had hosted genocide survivors who had, against all odds, managed to cross the Burundian border, narrowly escaping the killers.

When the things they had run away from in 1994 in Rwanda began to show in Burundi, it was our turn to do as they had done more than two decades ago. We crossed into Rwanda and these survivors were our hosts. They welcomed us with open arms in their country and home. Today I have a second family.

A few months ago I attended a wedding of one of these survivors, Bosco, whom I used to play football with in 1994, in Bujumbura. Life is full of surprises and blessings, I thought to myself. Many families in Africa have already experienced the benefits of solidarity amongst our people. Do our governments and leaders pay attention and act accordingly? These thoughts kept coming.

In Rwanda, despite lack of funding, Burundian refugees are treated better, more humanely than anywhere else in the region. Observing this first hand has helped inform my view on pan-Africanism. For me, pan-Africanism is no longer a vague idea; it's a daily – lived – reality.

As the writer David Gakunzi suggested: “25 years ago, Rwanda was an example of what not to do, today it is an example to emulate for all of us, Africans”. Rwandans own it to themselves to grasp why they are perceived in this positive light and to hold on to the reasons dearly.

For those amongst us who acknowledge the moral opprobrium that the inaction of our governments 25 years ago throws on our collective consciences –and also because African lives matter – the least that we can do is support Rwanda and Rwandans in these moments that evoke so much suffering.

In this commemorative period, more than at any other time, Africa is Rwanda and Rwanda is Africa. Or, at least, that's how it should be.