**Rwanda's genocide — what happened, why it happened, and how it still matters**

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This week marks 20 years since the start of the genocide in Rwanda, so the world has spent some time reflecting on one of the most horrifying — and most defining — events in post-Cold War history.

What may have gotten lost in all of this is what actually happened in Rwanda, a land-locked, Maryland-sized country in central Africa. Here's what you need to know about how 1 million people were systematically slaughtered, why it happened, how it changed the world, and where Rwanda stands today.

### What happened

The Rwandan genocide was a systematic campaign by the Hutu ethnic majority aimed at wiping out each and every member of the minority Tutsi group. The Hutu-controlled government and allied militias slaughtered between 800,000 and one million Tutsis before a Tutsi rebel group overthrew them. Over 100,000 Hutus were also killed, including both moderate Hutus killed by Hutu extremists and those killed by Tutsis in so-called "revenge killings."

The genocide was set into motion by the death of Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana. On April 6th, 1994, Habyarimana's plane was shot down by a missile of unknown origin. Government-aligned forces used (Hutu) Habyarimana's death as an excuse to begin a campaign of slaughter they had been planning for some time, and the genocide began on April 7th. It went on for about 100 days.

### The story behind the Rwandan genocide begins with colonialism

The split between Hutus and Tutsis arose not as a result of religious or cultural differences, but economic ones. "Hutus" were people who farmed crops, while "Tutsis" were people who tended livestock. Most Rwandans were Hutus. Gradually, these class divisions became seen as ethnic designations.

Because cattle were more valuable than crops, the minority Tutsis became the local elite. By the time Belgium took over the land in 1917 from Germany (who took it in 1884), an ethnic Tutsi elite had been the ruling monarchy for quite some time.

German and Belgian rule made the dividing lines between the groups sharper. This "divide and conquer" strategy meant supporting the Tutsi monarchy and requiring that all local chiefs be Tutsis, turning the Tutsis into symbols of colonial rule for the Hutu majority.

Post-independence, the resentment created by colonial divide-and-conquer bred violence. Seeing as Hutus were a large majority, they handily won the country's first elections in 1961, and the regime that followed was [staunchly Hutu nationalist](http://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/0472098985-ch4.pdf). Intermittent violence between Hutus and Tutsis became a feature of post-independent Rwandan.

### The Rwandan genocide was a pre-planned extermination campaign

The Rwandan genocide was a different class of violence altogether from what came before it. It wasn't just wartime violence; it was a directed, pre-meditated attempt to eliminate an entire people.

The Hutu government had fought a war with Ugandan-based Tutsi rebels, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), from 1990 to 1993. By early 1994 [at the latest](http://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/africa/rwanda0406/rwanda0406.pdf), many Hutus, including a number of important government officials, had come to the conclusion that the real problem was Rwanda's Tutsi minority. They began organizing armed paramilitary gangs and training them to prepare to wipe out Tutsi civilians.

President Habyarimana had agreed to a United Nations-enforced peace agreement with the RPF. The missile that shot down Habyarimana's plane shattered that agreement. We still don't know today whether Tutsi rebels or Hutu extremists opposed to the peace agreement fired the missile, but it quickly became irrelevant. The Hutu ethnic supremacists saw a green light to begin their extermination campaign.

On April 7th, the killing began. Hutu militias, most infamously the government-backed Interahamwe, went city-to-city and village-to-village, slaughtering Tutsis with guns and machetes. The militias were horrifyingly efficient, using a radio station to coordinate the beginnings of the campaign around the country and to tell people where "[the graves were not quite yet full](http://books.google.com/books?id=JVP9gdreY6gC&pg=PA101&lpg=PA101&dq=RTLMC+go+to+work&source=bl&ots=ss5X8uOgef&sig=ULWwBSqNAP69qiZ9RnmbthIIYeQ&hl=en&sa=X&ei=hY9EU6GyMMqYyAH9_YHYAg&ved=0CE8Q6AEwBg#v=onepage&q=RTLMC%20go%20to%20work&f=false)." They were killing at a pace of about 8000 Tutsis per day.

### There's a strong case the world could have stopped it

Unlike earlier mass killings, such as the Holocaust, the international community had advance evidence of the coming genocide. Once it launched, they had evidence of where it was going, and still did nothing.

Canadian General Romeo Dallaire, who commanded the small UN observer force tasked with implementing the peace agreement, heard the Hutus were [planning genocide in January 1994](http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/africa/11/13/sbm.dallaire.profile/). He informed the higher-ups at the UN, but wasn't permitted to act.

Even after the genocide began, and the evidence of slaughter became undeniable, the international community did nothing. The United States [actively discouraged](http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB53/) the UN Security Council from authorizing a more robust deployment.

In hindsight, there's a good chance the UN could have done something. General Dallaire believes that, with an extra 5,000 troops and a stronger UN mandate, he could have saved "[hundreds of thousands](http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/africa/11/13/sbm.dallaire.profile/)." The failure to intervene, which Bill Clinton calls one of the greatest regrets of his presidency, catalyzed the modern movement in favor of humanitarian military intervention to prevent genocide. Two major Obama administration officials — Susan Rice and Samantha Power — became converted to the cause of humanitarian intervention in part due to America's inaction in Rwanda.

### It ended only after Tutsi rebels defeated the government

The day after the genocide began, the Tutsi rebel group RPF, led by Paul Kagame, launched an offensive aimed at toppling the Rwandan government. In about one hundred days, the RPF[defeated](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/rwanda/etc/cron.html) the government forces. Kagame, a Tutsi, became the country's leader in all but name: a Hutu was technically made president while Kagame was vice president, but Kagame [controlled the army](http://books.google.com/books?id=O3aNPwAACAAJ).

Though the RPF stopped the genocide from reaching its completion, their victory was hardly clean. A Human Rights Watch assessment of the campaign concluded that "systematic" RPF killings claimed [tens of thousands of Hutu lives](http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/rwanda/Geno15-8-03.htm). These "revenge killings" by oppressed are sadly common after episodes of mass killing, and one reason why the lack of international peacekeeping forces can be so devastating.

Moreover, the aftershocks of the Rwandan genocide [contributed](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-11108589) to the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). That war, the [deadliest since World War 2](http://www.unfpa.org/public/home/news/pid/1399), was sparked [in part](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-11108589) by 2 million Hutus fleeing Rwanda attacking Tutsis. Some of the 2 million were militiamen, who attacked Tutsis in the DRC. The Kagame government supported local Tutsi forces, and the conflict escalated.