Rwanda: The 11-year cover-up

ABSTRACT
The missile attack that brought down the Falcon 50 plane carrying Presidents Juvenal Habyarimana of Rwanda and Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi as it approached Kigali airport on Apr 6, 1994, was surely one of the worst terrorist acts of that decade. The incident led to the shattering of Rwanda's fragile peace based on the Arusha Accords of 1993, war resumed, and hundreds of thousands of people were massacred. Philpot details how certain powerful people have worked quietly and effectively behind the scenes to prevent the world from knowing who planned and executed the assassination of two African presidents that sparked the genocide in Rwanda for 11 years now.

FULL TEXT
Headnote
For 11 years now, certain powerful people have worked quietly and effectively behind the scenes to prevent the world from knowing who planned and executed the assassination of two African presidents that sparked the genocide in Rwanda. Robin Philpot reports.

The missile attack that brought down the Falcon 50 plane carrying Presidents Juvenal Habyarimana of Rwanda and Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi as it approached Kigali airport on 6 April 1994, was surely one of the worst terrorist acts of that decade.

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When the plane was shot down, the international community multiplied solemn demands to find out the truth. After all, the assassination of political leaders and heads of state is no trivial matter.

Witness the reaction to the assassination of Rank Hariri, Yitzhak Rabin, Olaf Palme or John F. Kennedy. But nothing came of all the sombre resolve. In 1998, the official UN inquiry into the incident even called it a "plane crash". Would anybody dare call 9/11 a "plane crash"?

"It is a very mysterious scandal," declared the former UN secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghah in a recent interview. "Four reports have been made on Rwanda - the French Parliamentary Report, the Belgian Senate Report, Kofi Annan's UN Report, and the Organisation of African Unity Report. All four say absolutely nothing about the shooting down of the Rwandan president's plane. It shows the power of the intelligence services that can force people to be quiet," Boutros-Ghali said.

The one exception to this litany or official obtuseness is the seven-year investigation by the French anti-terrorist
judge, Jean-Louis Bruguière. It is only a partial exception since—all we know is what was leaked to the French daily, Le Monde, in March 2004.

The French investigation lays the blame for the missile attack on the current Rwandan President, Paul Kagame, and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which incidentally was founded in Washington in 1988.

Judge Bruguière’s inquiry was launched because the pilots and crew were French nationals. He gathered sworn testimony from hundreds of people, including exiled RPF dissidents such as Abdul Ruzibiza and Jean-Paul Mugabe who had worked closely with the RPF leader.

The French report also brought the plane’s black box flight recorder back into the frame and that it had not disappeared as the official story would have us believe.

UN officials were forced to admit that it had been sitting in a closet at UN headquarters in New York for 10 years, a “major screw-up” according to Kofi Annan.

These conclusions corroborate information that Michael Hourigan, a former investigator for the prosecution at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), had uncovered in 1996. When Hourigan began finding evidence of RPF involvement in the attack, he was ordered to stop all investigations even though his immediate superiors had initially encouraged him.

Bruguière’s conclusions also permanently bury the far-flung theories that the late Rwandan president’s own circle
had engineered the missile attack as par. of some Machiavellian plan. That story was popular for a few months in
1994 but even its most ardent proponents have dropped it just as they have surprisingly dropped all demands to
find out who was responsible.

That was essentially the depth of information available until Boutros-Ghali told me in an interview that "Judge
Bruguière also alleged that the CIA was involved in the assassination".

He then added that Bruguiere may not say so in public, pointing out that the Anglo-American intelligence
apparatus is much more powerful than France's secret service.

Though Boutros-Ghali's statement is very important, circumstantial evidence regarding the 11-year cover-up was
already leading inexorably to tightly closed doors and mouths in Washington.

For example, though the black box was located, we still do not know its contents because for some dubious
reason, the UN turned it over to the American National Transportation Safety Board in Washington, and not to the
International Civil Aviation Organisation.

That American organisation has kept the contents secret, staving off any further inquiries, and unfortunately, the
mainstream media have stopped trying to find out more. Investigations into the downing of the plane would be
better conducted by the ICTR. There, prosecutors are invested with the power and the credibility to investigate any
crime which clearly falls within the Tribunal's mandate.

Interestingly, however, the career curves of two chief prosecutors, Louise Arbour and Carla Del Ponte, have been
determined by whether or not they have favoured prosecution of RPF crimes, including the Habyarimana and
Ntaryamira assassination.

It should be remembered that the ad hoc ICTR and its sister tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, is a major legacy of
Madeleine Albright, who was US ambassador to the UN before being named secretary of state in December 1996.
Secretary Albright handpicked the prosecutors and greatly influenced Tribunal operations.

Louise Arbour was the chief prosecutor who, though initially enthusiastic, shut down Hourigan's investigation of
the attack after she had consulted yet unidentified people in higher places.

Since then, Arbour has been fast-tracked to become a justice in Canada's Supreme Court before being appointed

Although she loves to make speeches on every imaginable subject, she refuses to answer any questions about the
two assassinated African presidents and what she knows about the cover-up.

Who were the higher-ups who ordered who to stop Hourigan's investigation?

Carla Del Ponte from Switzerland on the other hand made the gallant statement that if the RPF was responsible for
the missile attack, the history of the Rwandan genocide would have to be rewritten, and hinted at the possibility of
prosecuting members of the RPF.

As a result, she was unceremoniously removed from the Rwandan branch of the Tribunal in August 2003 at the
behest of Washington and others.
The South African judge, Richard Goldstone, was the ICTR's first prosecutor. Though his stint lasted only until 1996, he wrote a self-aggrandising book about his experience, entitled For Humanity, in which he clearly indicates both the CIA and the US State Department's role in gathering information and preparing indictments.

Needless to say, nobody was indicted for the missile attack. In fact, to this day nobody has been troubled by the ICTR in connection with that attack. Another indicator comes from testimony made at the ICTR by the UN peacekeeping commander, Romeo Dallaire, who was responsible for airport security when the plane was shot down.

French military officers in Kigali met Dallaire and offered to investigate the assassination. But he refused, saying he had already discussed the issue with the Americans who were prepared to dispatch an investigating team from its bases in Germany. The American investigation, of course, never officially took place. Luc Marchai, the Belgian colonel who headed peacekeeping troops in the Kigali sector at the time, implicates the US in the 11-year cover-up. In his 2001 book, he asks rhetorically: "Who is powerful enough to have prevented a real international inquiry from casting light upon the events that occurred when President Habyarimana was flying home from a regional summit in Dar es Salaam?"

But what about US motives? Why would the US get involved in the assassination or two presidents from small African countries?

From 1990 on, Washington and London had been banking on the "new leadership in Central Africa" as represented by Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni and RPF leader Paul Kagame. All testimony indicates that American diplomats forced Habyarimana to relinquish power to the invading RPF mainly through the Arusha Accords signed in August 1993.

After communal elections held the following month, however, it became obvious that Habyarimana would easily beat the RPF in a general election. The "new leadership in Central Africa" would thus be handicapped by some power-sharing agreement and unable to act freely in the area.

Following the assassinations, the RPF went on the offensive. With help from Britain, the US vehemently opposed UN intervention in Rwanda and managed to stymie the organisation when massacres were already taking place.

France and Nigeria on the other hand, were pushing for major UN action. Intervention could have stopped the massacres, but it would also have scuttled plans for a decisive RPF victory, forced some form of power sharing, and spoiled plans to remodel Central Africa.

Boutros-Ghali describes this re-modelling as "a repetition of Fashoda" in reference to the tort on the Upper Nile (now in Sudan) where French and British troops met in September 1898. Both were trying to dominate Africa, but France was forced to withdraw and concede Fashoda to the British.

"Central Africa has been the scene of a new Anglo-American conflict with France, and the Anglo-American block won through Uganda and Rwanda," added Boutros-Ghali.

A US State Department spokesman made exactly the same point to the French journalist, Jean Daniel, on 16 November 1996, shortly after the Rwandan army invaded the then Zaire for the first time. Predicting Mobutu's imminent fall, assistant secretary of state, John Korkblum said: "Watch out for Africa: France has it all wrong. The
strong man is in Uganda, not in Kinshasa."

The former US secretary of state Warren Christopher had also made no bones about Washington's goal to unseat France on the continent.

If the CIA, the most powerful covert action agency in the world, was even slightly involved in the assassination and the subsequent cover-up, we must ask what means have been used to cover the tracks and to misinform international public opinion?

Have these efforts to misinform also helped to rehabilitate and spread an insidious colonialist discourse about Africa where the message is that Africans can't stop killing each other, all African leaders are corrupt, and therefore Europe and America will just have to intervene militarily and take direct political and economic control once again? In other work 21st century colonialism.

Sidebar
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DETAILED

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