

## Never again...?

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**The author here draws a parallel between the tragic events in Rwanda in 1994 and those in the Gaza Strip today to invite us to reflect on mass violence being repeated – a negation of the prospect of “Never again!” that has so often been promised. He does this by looking back at a text he wrote in 2004 in Kigali in the days following a solemn commemoration that took place in memory of the Rwandan genocide. The parallel he draws underlines the extent to which the law of war and the responsibility to protect civilian populations end up being trampled on.**

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Just as the commemorative events marking the thirtieth anniversary of the genocide against the Tutsi and the massacre of moderate Hutu come to an end, the world is divided in defining Israel's military operations in the Gaza Strip, carried out in response to the attacks that Hamas perpetrated on 7 October last year. Several legal proceedings have begun, though they are subject to the long timeframes of international justice. In this context, the commemoration of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 could only invite a comparison between the inhumanity of both situations and between the international community of yesterday and today leaving civilian populations to their fate. That was the comparison that Chris McGreal, an independent journalist, made in his article that was published in *The Guardian*, entitled: “Thirty years ago the world failed to stop the Rwandan genocide. Now we fail Gaza.”<sup>1</sup>

For this writer, the same countries that proclaimed “Never again!” in the wake of the Rwandan tragedy have been giving Israel free reign for more than six months. It took the deaths of foreign aid workers to prompt these countries to react somewhat. Though the Rwandan genocide and the war in Gaza each have their own distinct historical, geographical and political context, they share certain characteristics: extreme violence, considerable human suffering and an inability of the international community and powerful nations to exercise the famous “right to intervene for humanitarian purposes” and its offshoot: “the responsibility to protect”. This doctrine was developed in 2005 in response to the international community's failures to prevent or halt mass atrocities, especially those perpetrated in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. It stipulates that when sovereign states prove to be deficient the international community is responsible for protecting populations against war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and genocides. Before then, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, set up in 1993, and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, set up at the end of 1994, led to the creation of the International Criminal Court in 2002.

Rwanda and Gaza. The comparison may jar in some minds or at least raise many objections. Yet these two situations and other examples of mass killings illustrate the tragic consequences of conflicts that are rooted in deep political and identity-based tensions and that have been left without proper consideration

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<sup>1</sup> Chris McGreal, “Thirty years ago the world failed to stop the Rwandan genocide. Now we fail Gaza”, *The Guardian*, 10 April 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/apr/10/rwanada-genocide-lessons-gaza-israel>

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and solutions for too long. At a time when the memory of Rwandan victims is being revived through these commemorations, I felt the need to dive back into the emotion and sentiments that left a deep mark on me when I took part in the solemn ceremonies held in Kigali in 2004, to which most of the world's leaders were invited. To reread the narrative I told back then about this event is to invite you to reflect on unspeakable acts being repeated, on the fragility and futility of contrite words, and on the mortal legacy of vengeful desire fuelled by unknown suffering.

### **Warding off “the illness of wounded hearts”**

*Just in front of me, almost beneath my feet, protected by the huge slabs of the Gisozi memorial built facing the hills of Kigali, were the remains of 250,000 inhabitants of the capital alone, massacred over the course of 100 days of murderous madness. That period began on 7 April 1994 and ended on 17 July. It took place 10 years ago.*

*Like all the guests attending this tenth commemoration of the genocide, I struggled to make sense of this figure. As I laid the red rose I had been holding since the start of this ceremony upon the scorching concrete of the collective vault, my thoughts went to Cécile, a brave, young woman who is full of life and who looked after the house where the teams from Handicap International [Humanity & Inclusion today] were staying. Coincidentally, her husband Jean-Baptiste and I shared the same first name. I thought of her son too. She had told me that morning that both were killed during the first days of the massacre. She knows neither how they were killed nor who killed them, nor where their bodies were buried. All that remains for her is the memory of those moments when they left, hoping to increase their chances of not being spotted. They were wiped out from human existence forever... as if evocation of individual faces was now needed for us to appreciate the unbearable extent of a massacre that is too quickly reduced to empty figures expressing neither the pain survivors endure today nor the ordeal victims underwent. My thoughts also went to the friends of my brother Christophe and his wife Doris, who lived in the country of a thousand hills for four years before leaving it to go on a humanitarian mission in Cambodia. Their friends were perhaps here, beneath one of these slabs, or perhaps elsewhere, wherever their frantic flee took them before they collapsed under the blows dealt by murderers who were rarely anonymous; there has been no news from them since that fateful year.*

*As regards Cambodia, there we find a country where another form of extermination unfolded, but that extermination has not been officially acknowledged by the international community.<sup>2</sup> The survivors of that period have not been able to see their exterminated loved ones honoured or their own suffering recognised by justice brought to them, not even imperfect justice brought too slowly, like it was here. As a choir, clearly moved, filled the air with magnificent song, my memories of a painful dawn in Phnom Penh in February 1981 remained. Bones were lined up beside a mass grave that had just been discovered: skulls that had been smashed under the blows of torture. My wife Marie and I had just arrived in this other battered country. We wanted to see the gruesome consequences of another form of collective madness to try to understand it and to contemplate. We believed in the power of indignation, and we could not imagine such a denial of humanity ever emerging again.*

*I had been to Kigali before. That visit was back in 1994, just after one of the most important missions in our organisation's history had got underway. Already back then, during that visit, I was overwhelmed by*

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<sup>2</sup> Definitions of the Cambodian genocide were hotly debated among legal experts and historians, but the massacre was nevertheless recognised as a genocide under international law in November 2018.

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*incomprehension as I listened to the stories of survivors, almost all marked by vile details revealing an inconceivable betrayal of social bonds and even of blood ties. I was deeply disturbed by a desperate sense of impossible atonement and “compulsory” forgiveness that each person was forced into without any other possible choice! That lost generation and inability to understand are the very reason for a duty that binds all of us: none of us are allowed to ignore, forget or be indifferent. This harsh truth should remind us of the danger of maintaining, or even just tolerating, hatred between communities, simply on the grounds that they are different. Such hatred shapes the youngest minds lastingly and it fosters the emergence of chaos in which it runs riot.*

*Indeed, the acts of violence that were perpetrated by much of the Rwandan population with terrifying madness is best explained by a sudden collapse of shared values and references and a denial of them by all those who were supposed to embody them. “Orders” without any clear hierarchy abruptly made all ties obsolete, including Christian values in which Rwandans had been steeped since childhood: “Thou shalt not kill”... And those who, embodying such values, tried to intervene with rare bravery were the first ones to be mowed down with irreverent savagery.*

*Inspiring tales of resistance were not common in this carnage and will never erase the sense of horror that the slaughter should rouse. Yet we should cherish such stories as they are the lights that now illuminate the path Rwandan children need to follow today. They represent all that remained humane during this unspeakable tragedy that Rwandan children have to grow up with nonetheless. Every odious aspect of inhumanity was revealed to them, as witnesses, as victims and – too often – as perpetrators. Ten years have gone by and this commemoration seemed to me like an opportunity to fulfil a promise – the promise to return to Rwanda to face, once again, this complex mix of feelings endlessly colliding with each other: resentment, compassion, remorse and fear.*

*During a pause between a song and a speech, I observed my immediate neighbours among the neat rows of leading figures waiting for the president to come and shake their hands one by one. In truth, such sparse rows of figures here was not a good sign – it was actually a disgrace! Where were the world’s heads of state who were moved so belatedly by the collapse of this small nation? Where were the senior United Nations officials who were unable to ward off the causes of this bloodbath? Where were the representatives of the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), now gone, who swung into action on a large scale to tend to the wounds? I was ready for a completely different gathering, for crowds expressing a fervour worthy of the widespread responsibilities and the resolutions they call for.*

*The vagaries of protocol placed me beside representatives of the main protagonists in this country’s tragic story. The most salient moments of that day were yet to come. On my right, there was Renaud Muselier, the French secretary of state for foreign affairs in Jean-Pierre Raffarin’s third government. President Paul Kagame greeted the French delegation in a clearly cold manner. Then he stopped for a moment to better highlight the presence of Louis Michel, the Belgian government’s energetic minister of foreign affairs who was behind his country’s spectacular repentance four years earlier. On my left, set back a little, there was Roméo Dallaire, the Canadian lieutenant-general who commanded the 2,500 soldiers of the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda in Kigali at the start of the massacre and who had to oversee their virtual withdrawal without any glory. Some people whisper that by choosing to come here to contemplate, beside survivors, Dallaire had proved to be brave in a way in which he was not during the genocide. But that is a repulsive argument about a man who was actually a prisoner of the orders he received – the reflection of a system that failed miserably. Since then, this man has shared the nightmares of the survivors, of those who he knows he abandoned to the machetes. He desperately feels the need to explain his story and apologise, but he now points the finger at those who ordered*

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*him to bear an unreasonably heavy burden in his emphatic book “Shake Hands With The Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda”, the royalties from which he wants to devote to protecting Rwandan children. In the procession that walked slowly up the steps of the memorial, I introduced myself to him, greeting him warmly.*

*Lastly, there was the most intense moment in this first ceremony: a dignified, symbolic burial of the remains of several dozen bodies recently dug up from a mass grave. One by one, from one pair of hands to another, the coffins were lowered and lined up in a huge vault designed to finally house them. The survivors – mostly women – who had gathered around the memorial were gasping and could no longer hold back their tears. Many of them were grasping photos of their loved ones tightly to better involve them in this vital ritual, the brutal circumstances of their deaths having deprived them of this rite. The songs became sweeter and ended as the vault was definitively closed.*

*Once the flame of memory had been lit by a child, we were invited to visit the permanent exhibition devoted to the history of the genocide. In front of powerful images, accompanied with audiovisual media of remarkable quality, I started thinking again of my visit to the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, set up in the famous prison where tens of thousands of Cambodians were humiliated, tortured and exterminated by the Khmer Rouge. That was another period of history with other national ambiguities, other spheres of influence, other international alliances, another awareness of the responsibilities at stake, and another quest for justice. Yet its impact, its evocative power, the disgust it inspires, and the imprecise but real form of guilt it rouses links – across continents – these two memorials in the universal history of crimes against humanity perpetrated in the 20th century.*

*The first speeches were already underway and echoing when we finally reached the Amahoro Stadium, amahoro meaning “peace” in Kinyarwanda... Déo, the team leader for Handicap International [Humanity & Inclusion], was by my side when the first wail of sorrow suddenly pierced the atmosphere of this commemorative gathering, which had, up to then, plunged the public ceremony’s 30,000 Rwandan guests into a silence that was heavy and solemn. These mournful cries came from a woman. In a desperate move, she rushed up to the edge of the stand as if she were going to throw herself into the middle of the stadium. Soothing arms wrapped around her. And as she was being carried aside with countless precautions, other wails resounded in response to hers and filled the entire arena. Most cries came from young people, distraught when they recalled the martyrdom of their people – a population that was its own executioner. These young people were unable to control an emotion they had held back for too long: they were now expressing their pain for the whole world to hear. The speaker, Alpha Oumar Konaré, who was chairman of the African Union Commission, called for a pause out of respect. A shiver of understanding rippled through the crowd and the collective tension was released.*

*In the central stand, protected from the sun that would sometimes pierce the threatening clouds of the rainy season, there were several international delegations who had wanted to take part in this commemorative ceremony marked by the words “Never again!”. Expressions of compassion and brotherhood followed one after another in speeches from guests, who were mainly African. Again, the low level of representation of Western countries contrasted with the event’s gravity and meaning for all the world’s peoples. The words were sometimes vehement in regard to Western countries, whose conduct and aims in the African Great Lakes region – and in Africa in general – were stigmatised. This increased the fervour in regard to the genocide’s victims.*

*After some words from the Ugandan president Yozeri Museveni, who briefly lightened the stadium’s atmosphere by quoting African proverbs on duties for good neighbourly relations, President Thabo*

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*Mbeki spoke for South Africa. He apologised on behalf of his country for having supplied the former regime with weapons and for not having spoken up loud enough during the tragedy. “Not to tell the truth is to impose additional suffering upon the victims”, he declared forcefully, before regretting that some countries were “too arrogant to utter the right words”. And as he ended his speech, which a huge crowd listened to in impressive silence, he likened yesterday’s Rwanda to “churches where massacres took place and that we no longer visit”, but he assured everyone that “today’s Rwanda is no longer a graveyard that angels have abandoned” and that “it prides itself on forgiveness”.*

*Emotions were most intense when the Belgian prime minister Guy Verhofstadt, the only Western government leader present at the commemoration, began to speak. Addressing the people of Rwanda, he again asked for forgiveness on behalf of his country’s population and government for having failed in the mission with which their contingent of 1,300 UN peacekeepers had been tasked. By withdrawing this contingent in the first days of the extermination plan unfolding, after the slaughter of ten of these soldiers by the Rwandan Armed Forces, he acknowledged that “Belgium did not fulfil its duty to intervene, its duty of brotherhood”. Guy Verhofstadt expressed his sadness and mentioned the horrible images no words can express and the intelligent minds insulted and wasted. He touched upon the memory of sons, daughters, spouses and mothers who were decimated and the ordeal of survivors who have to give their existence new meaning.*

*He gave the ceremony its true universal dimension by reminding everyone that all states had failed in their responsibility and task, by their indifference and not doing enough. At a time when the spectre of ethnic cleansing, hatred and negation of others was reemerging in other parts of the globe, he invited each person to allow these past events to prompt reflection: “Rwanda’s tragedy was that it became the tomb of a certain idea of mankind. Yet by excluding any vengeful plans, the Rwandan people have offered the world a promising picture of the future.”*

*He then denounced the blatant disproportion between “the media clamours about the Iraq crisis and the diplomacy of silence as regards what happened here, in this region of the world”. Subservient to colonisers and excluded from international trade, Africa is kept aside from economic changes underway. To put an end to this injustice, he appealed to the moral duty of rich countries, calling on them to introduce an ambitious 10-year development programme for Africa to launch the continent into the 21st century. “Africans deserve this,” he said, “in memory of the less glorious excesses of Western history.”*

*The applause was warm and sincere as these words were perceived to be right and the repentance was underlined by a communion, in the same pain, with the families of the ten Belgian soldiers who were brutally killed, also abandoned by UN peacekeeping troops. No orders had been given to intervene, neither to save their own nor to stand in the way, and thereby show the genocidal perpetrators that the international community would not let a brutal project, already planned for a long time, unfold under the orders of a known group of extremists within the ruling authorities.*

*President Paul Kagame began to speak, giving a closing speech in English to clearly address the international community. He made sure to apologise for this to the audience and started by inviting the attendees “to share a moment of reflection on the toxic legacy of the genocide, which should not, as the West suggests, be reduced to the outcome of ancestral hatred”. He paid homage to the anonymous victims, none of whom deserved to die, and invited everyone “to listen to the silent cries resounding from the one thousand hills”. He underlined the daily struggle of survivors, who, 10 years on, are still unable to put into words the anguish that grips them. And how could they? Did this*

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*“genocide, the most prolific one in history”, according to him, not include pupils being killed by their school teachers or disciples being killed by their religious leaders? Did more than 100,000 children not have to suddenly take on the overly burdensome role of family head? “Grudges, poor governance, corruption and autocracy combined their effects to disfigure a whole people,” he claimed. Positioning himself as the nation’s father, he implored the Rwandan people “to know and face the truth in order to live better, relieve the departed, help the survivors and thereby assert that life is stronger than death”.*

*Then the tone became more scathing as he evoked “those whose mission was to risk their lives to save others”. Though he declared, on behalf of the Rwandan people, that he and his country had to admit major responsibilities, he nuanced this message with a reference to “the complex relations between the tradition of violence specific to the country’s people and serious mistakes made by colonial powers”. Having made sure to accept the apologies of those who, like the Belgians and, to some extent, the Americans, had said sorry, the indictment came. The tone was harsh, as were the accusations, starting with “the disgrace of the UN, who gave the population a false sense of security”. Then the subject matter became political: he called for “a deep reform of a system that is necessary but totally deficient”. The stand of officials applauded.*

*Next, the focus was on France, the only Western country named in addition to Belgium, but for different reasons. Tough words detonated unsparingly. He reminded everyone that families who were related to members of his party and who had stayed in Rwanda received threats from French diplomats when he was still a war leader in exile. He mentioned military training and weapon supplies for a regime whose intentions Paris knew about. And even though France did intervene, it did so “far too belatedly, and as part of a deliberate strategy to protect the killers”. He dealt his strongest blow when he said that France’s representatives had “the cheek to stay here without apologising for their country’s responsibilities”. He then brought this moment of diplomatic tension to an end.*

*By that point, the journalists who had been half-asleep on the lawn were wide awake again! The cameras switched to Renaud Muselier who, at that moment, clearly wanted to be anywhere but there, though he remained impassive. When the ceremony had barely ended, he left the stadium, avoiding questions from journalists. That afternoon, he decided to leave Rwanda sooner than planned.*

*Everyone wondered why the Rwandan president had issued such a grave allegation. However, this confrontation between the Rwandan Patriotic Front, today’s ruling party, and France was not new. And the French parliamentary commission of inquiry had pulled no punches in regard to France’s blindness. Yet Paul Kagame the fighter did not want to forget France’s direct military support for the old regime or the ban on the Rwandan Patriotic Front intervening in the zone covered by Opération Turquoise. But the main reason for his accusation doubtless resided in the tense discussions, in the weeks leading up to the commemoration, about press leaks on the report from the French judge Jean-Louis Bruguière claiming the Rwandan Patriotic Front bore responsibility for shooting down the aeroplane of Rwanda’s President Juvénal Habyarimana on 6 April 1994. For the regime’s extremists, news of Habyarimana’s death was the go-ahead for their plan to exterminate the Tutsi, as well as Hutu opposition. In private, Louis Michel told me he thought it unlikely that the French diplomatic corps were behind such a provocation just before the commemoration. However, France’s argument stressing judicial independence had little chance of appeasing the Rwandan authorities. And for the peoples of Africa, there was panache in defying France in this way while television cameras from all over the world were focussed on you.*

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*For a few moments, I sensed how difficult it had become to be French in Rwanda. It felt strange to find yourself caught up in a diplomatic row disrupting the event's commemorative fervour and ethos of sharing and to stand in the way of peoples coming together in the conciliatory spirit the ceremony called for. Being asked to apologise under the watchful gaze of a whole people does not have the healing quality of an unprompted request for forgiveness. And France is not known for being able to face up to its past. A truth acceptable to all will therefore have to wait for history to ascertain responsibilities. In contrast, Belgium's situation was more favourable! The Belgian government had chosen to repent – a brave choice, given Belgium's responsibility in introducing an "ethnic" split within Rwanda. Not only did the Belgians fully take part in these ceremonies through the presence of a 200-strong delegation, and thereby commune with the Rwandan people in the homage paid to the victims, but they also restored their soldiers' lost honour and positioned themselves as the Western leader of a new, high-standard vision of cooperation between the West and African nations. Well done, Belgium! For the representative of Handicap International [Humanity & Inclusion] at the commemoration, this contrast between France and Belgium was particularly striking as the NGO has clear Franco-Belgian origins.*

*The stadium gradually emptied, and the guests were then invited to a dignified, moving inauguration of a memorial to honour the ten Belgian paratroopers who were slaughtered by the Rwandan Armed Forces on 7 April 1994. The paratroopers' loved ones were at this inauguration. Now, ten columns of white granite, built by Brussels on Rwandan soil, glisten in the Kigali sun as a reminder of the sacrifice of these ten Belgians.*

*The day was brought to an end with a new gathering at the Amahoro Stadium, this time dedicated to the people of Rwanda. The speeches focused on their own responsibility. Torrential rain poured down on the crowds, "like on 7 April 1994", commented, in a grave tone, those present.*

*Once the ceremonies were over, a reality remained: the Rwandan people have no choice but to live bewildered by the acts that were perpetrated, with the coexistence of victims and their killers, and with the guilt of widespread indignity, into which their survival instinct has compelled them. So I could not stop myself from thinking – like before, in Cambodia, faced with a people recovering from mass violence still felt everywhere – that the individual and collective responsibilities for this tragedy call for a particular duty of the community of nations: the duty to provide the Rwandan people with assistance and support to help them overcome their doubts, their suspicions, their fears, their desire for revenge and their denunciations, but also their resentment about impunity and injustice. A duty of amends.*

*Today, it is impossible to come back from a stay in Rwanda unaffected, to not grapple with forever trying to comprehend, to not swing between disgust and admiration, between outrage and doubt, and to not face the nagging question about the real role, played in this tragedy, of each person you speak with here. As regards myself, I came back from Rwanda ever more convinced about the special role that NGOs can play in recognising suffering but also in the long, painful achievement of the reconciliation process. We can play this role all the more effectively given that our action does not depend on resolving the issue of responsibilities states bear. Thanks to our non-governmental nature, we can remain the simple but necessary expression of compassion, empathy and deep desire for solidarity among peoples. Everything must be done to save children born 10 years ago from the effects of "the illness of wounded hearts" that haunts and torments victims and killers alike. A burden weighs upon them and their families: the terrible burden of having called into question, through their acts and suffering, humanity's ability to overcome its darkest demons.*

Kigali, 7 April 2004

*Translated from the French by Thomas Young*

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### Biography

Jean-Baptiste Richardier • Jean-Baptiste Richardier is a doctor who co-founded Handicap International (HI, today renamed Humanity & Inclusion) in 1982 in aid of disabled Cambodian refugees, especially the many victims of anti-personnel mines. He helped develop the HI network, which is now present in around seventy countries. In 2014, he devoted himself to setting up the HI Institute on Humanitarian Action, then to helping launch the international review *Humanitarian Alternatives*, of which he is a board member. He is also one of the co-founders of United Against Inhumanity, an NGO created in October 2018.

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