

Refugee crisis in the Great Lakes: have any lessons been learned?

by Flora MacDonald

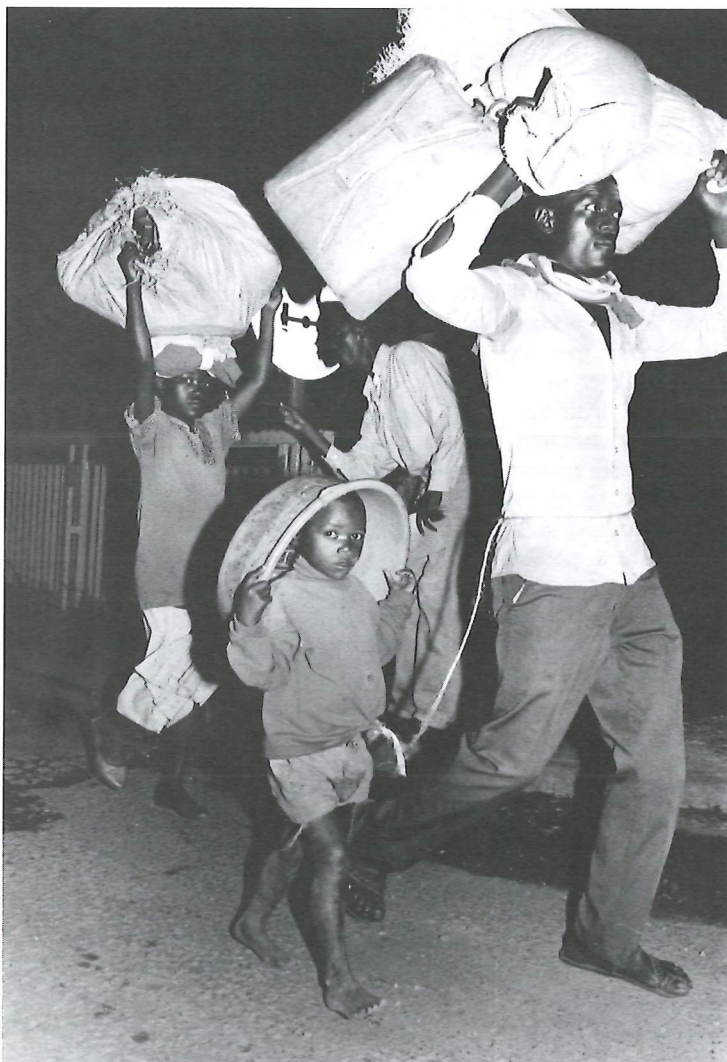
The following is an extract from the address given by the Honourable Flora MacDonald, former Canadian Foreign Minister, at the 12th Annual Human Rights Lecture hosted by the Refugee Studies Programme on 12 November 1997. The extract focuses on her recommendations for action.

The words 'Rwanda' and 'genocide' are inextricably linked for all time, signifying one of the most horrifying chapters in human history. In a three-month period, from April to July 1994, an estimated one million Rwandans were massacred. Collectively, the international community turned away and watched the horror from the sidelines. International inaction meant that genocide was not prevented, was not stopped once started - and finally allowed those responsible to escape.

That should have triggered a multitude of questions and a rapid and forceful response. It did neither. Questions as to whether there had been sufficient warning of the impending catastrophe came much later. And there is little sign of planning or corrective action to ensure that accurate intelligence is available to counter such disastrous events in the future. What lessons have we learned from this ongoing tragedy, and what action can realistically be taken?

◆ Early intervention

Many of the recent human rights tragedies of Central Africa, including the genocide in Rwanda, could have been prevented. The world had ample advance warning. Intervention and action at an early stage would have saved hundreds of thousands of lives. General Dallaire, commander of Unamir, has commented that with 5,000 troops and a clear mandate, he could have prevented most of the killing. There is nothing new in this lesson. It has been brought home time and time again in humanitarian crises and human rights emergencies the world over. Still, however, states fail to take timely and decisive action to avert the tragedies; instead they wait until the cost and implications of intervening become prohibitive and complex.



Rusomo bridge,
the border
between
Rwanda and
Tanzania, 1996

photograph: Howard Davies

The failure to intervene early in dealing with camp security is yet another stark example. A comprehensive and cooperative international effort at the outset, to ensure that arms never made it into the camps, that armed refugees and human rights criminals were excluded from refugee status and separated from the other refugees, that camps were located in secure areas sufficiently removed from the border, and that there was an adequate civilian policing presence trained in human rights and ready to respond to security concerns would have gone far to mitigate the enormity of the genocide. None of that happened. States can no longer afford to hesitate.

◆ **Absolute ban on arms transfers to the area**

Over the past three years, Amnesty International has published reports about and initiated various campaigns against the scandalous international arms trade that has flourished in Central Africa. The proliferation of light weapons and associated military equipment in the region was a major contributing factor to the human rights crisis in general, and the escalation of security problems in refugee camps in particular. There are a number of concrete measures that can be taken to ensure that arms transfers of this nature do not contribute to human rights abuse and put refugees in danger. Governments must enact adequate laws to criminalise any involvement in illegal arms transfers and must also conduct thorough investigations of any reports that their nationals or registered companies are involved in such transfers. Individuals who are involved must be brought to justice. International arms monitors should be placed at all or at least the most important key ports of entry in the region.

◆ **International protective presence**

UNHCR has recently again called for the establishment of some kind of standing police or quasi-military force to assist in dealing with crises of the nature it has faced in Central Africa. It is evident that a strong international presence of some kind,

including in refugee camps, was very much needed to monitor human rights and protect all non-combatants in the region. At the very least, human rights monitoring can play a crucial role in this regard. These would, however, need to be assured freedom of movement throughout the region and be given authority to intervene with those in control of territory, to seek action when human rights are violated.

The recommendations being put forward by a number of countries including my own [Canada] for a rapid reaction capability within the UN must be given serious consideration. There are two arguments for such a capability: first, the record of international crises points to the need in certain cases to respond rapidly and with

Human rights abuses are the crucial early warning signals of a troubled state. As the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Mrs Ogata, has often said, "Today's human rights abuses are tomorrow's refugees."

force; and second, the operational integrity of such a force requires that it not be assembled on an *ad hoc* basis or in haste. A standing force may well be a necessity for effective prevention.

◆ **Justice**

Efforts to enforce or restore security in refugee camps must be firmly grounded in a system of justice. First, there must be active and ongoing investigations to ensure that human rights criminals and other criminals are identified and apprehended. Anything else simply reinforces impunity and encourages further human rights violations and common crimes.

When well-founded accusations of genocide or other crimes are made against individuals, they must be turned over to authorities who will ensure that they are properly charged and then promptly brought to trial. It is not acceptable to accuse individuals and then simply hold them in

detention, without charge or trial - such as is now occurring in the overcrowded prisons of Rwanda.

The international criminal tribunals set up to investigate criminal violations in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda genocides, while making valiant efforts to carry out their mandates, are *ad hoc* in nature and lack consistent mandates and the necessary resources to do their work expeditiously. The need for a permanent international criminal court to deal with human rights criminals has never been more pronounced, more critical, than at present. The working group established by the security council to examine this issue should conclude its efforts rapidly, with concrete recommendations to accelerate this goal.

◆ **Reform of the security council**

There is a compelling need to enlarge and modernise the security council to ensure that its membership reflects the world of today rather than that of 1945. Africa has no permanent member on the security council and its membership in any capacity is infrequent. At the time of the outbreak of conflict in the former Yugoslavia, Europe had two permanent members on the council and a great deal of clout. Not surprisingly, reaction to the Bosnian crisis was almost immediate; reaction to deal with the crisis in the Great Lakes region of Africa took months to surface.

The security council should consider the setting up of a humanitarian subcommittee, charged with the responsibility of fully informing the council of developments and concerns regarding the humanitarian dimensions of increasingly numerous complex emergencies. Such a forum should make provision for the voices of non-governmental organisations to be heard on a regular basis. These organisations, rooted as they are in the activities of local communities, could be an effective medium to ensure early warning to key decision-makers.