

INTRODUCTION

On 6 April 1994, the plane carrying the Rwandan President was shot down as it approached Kigali. The slaughter of the Tutsi minority commenced in the days that followed. Simultaneously, leaders of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), an opposition movement organised by Tutsi exiles in Uganda, launched a military offensive in Rwanda and seized power in Kigali in early July.

From April to July 1994, between 500,000 and one million Rwandan Tutsi were systematically exterminated by militiamen under Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR in French) control. The genocide was the outcome of long-standing strategies implemented by politico-military extremists who roused ethnic resentments against the Tutsi minority. The extremists also killed many Rwandan Hutu who opposed the massacres.

The killings occurred in spite of the presence of UN troops in Rwanda, and the situation was characterised as 'a particularly serious humanitarian crisis'. Members of the UN Security Council were slow to call the Tutsi extermination 'genocide', hence evading the obligation to intervene and stop the slaughter, as stipulated by international law. Ten weeks after the start of the genocide, the UN authorised the French army to intervene. Opération Turquoise, which was undertaken from 23 June until 21 August, saved lives but also facilitated the escape of the FAR into Zaire.

Confronted with genocide, Médecins Sans Frontières met with government officials and issued public statements to try to mobilise governments from their inertia. Had they deployed armed forces to Rwanda, governments might have incapacitated the killers.

- On 22 April, Médecins Sans Frontières publicly condemned the withdrawal of UNAMIR forces, which left Rwandans alone to face the killers.
- On 18 May, Médecins Sans Frontières publicly asked French authorities, which had long supported the Rwandan regime, to use their influence to convince the regime to halt the massacres. A similar approach was made to Belgian authorities.
- On 24 May, Médecins Sans Frontières testified before the UN Commission on Human Rights and presented a report with

accounts from its volunteers in the hope of prompting rapid action by UN member states.

- On 18 June, Médecins Sans Frontières called for armed UN intervention.

These statements and actions resulted from numerous debates, conflicts and contradictory interpretations of the Rwandan situation and of MSF's role when faced with the following dilemmas:

- Was it acceptable for Médecins Sans Frontières, as a humanitarian organisation, to remain silent when confronted with genocide?
- Was it acceptable for Médecins Sans Frontières, as a humanitarian organisation, to call for armed intervention - an action that would lead to loss of human life?
- Could MSF call on UN member states to pursue other means of action, thereby risking giving legitimacy to ineffective responses, given the nature of genocide?
- Launched just as France proposed to intervene in Rwanda, was there a risk that Médecins Sans Frontières' appeal for armed intervention would be appropriated for political gain?