

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 culmination of long-standing strategies practised by politico-military extremists who roused ethnic resentments against the Tutsi. The extremists also killed many Rwandan Hutu who opposed the massacres.

Ten weeks after the start of the genocide, the UN authorized the French army to intervene with Opération Turquoise (23 June to 21 August). The intervention saved lives but also facilitated the escape of the FAR into Zaire. The administrative and political authorities, many of whom were responsible for the genocide, pushed hundreds of thousands of Rwandans with them, some under threat, many obeying official propaganda, and others due to fear of RPF reprisals. They fled to Zaire, Tanzania and Burundi, where refugee camps were rapidly installed.

In July 1994, Médecins Sans Frontières and other aid organisations mobilised to fight the cholera epidemic spreading among the refugees in Zaire. Once the epidemic was contained, the volunteers found themselves confronted with camps that were under the tight control of 'refugee leaders' responsible for the genocide. The camps were transformed into rear bases from which the reconquest of Rwanda was sought, via a massive diversion of aid, violence, propaganda, and threats against refugees wishing to repatriate.

Although MSF volunteers from the different sections were all revolted by the situation, they were divided over how it should be remedied. Some thought that MSF ought to cease its activities in the camps; others believed that it was possible to improve the situation, and many argued that MSF should remain for as long as the refugees needed assistance, no matter what the context.

In autumn 1994, the NGOs present in the camps in Zaire called on the UN Security Council to deploy an international police force to separate the refugees from those responsible for the

genocide. The appeal fell on deaf ears. In the absence of any signs of change in the context, MSF as a movement was forced to choose between continuing to work in the camps, thereby further strengthening the power of the génocidaires over the refugees, or withdrawing from the camps and leaving a population in distress. Several questions were posed:

- Is it acceptable for MSF to assist people who had committed genocide?
- Should MSF accept that its aid is instrumentalised by leaders who use violence against the refugees and proclaim their intention to continue the war in order to complete the genocide they had started?
- For all that, could MSF renounce assisting a population in distress and on what basis should its arguments be founded?

Each MSF section thought differently about how to respond to this dilemma:

The French section, considering that a humanitarian organisation has no mandate other than that which it imposed upon itself, refused to contribute to legitimise the perpetrators of the genocide and to strengthen their power through material assistance in the camps. The medical emergency over, the French section withdrew from the camps in Zaire and Tanzania in November and December 1994 respectively, and publicly explained its position.

The Belgian, Dutch and Spanish sections chose to remain, considering that the refugees still required assistance and that not everything had been done to bring an end to the control exercised by the génocidaires. The Belgian section began a 'humanitarian resistance' strategy aimed at loosening the génocidaires' hold over the aid pouring into the camps. The Dutch section endeavoured to document the situation with a view to lobbying the international community to do more to resolve the problem.

Given the lack of improvement in the situation, in July 1995 MSF Belgium and MSF Holland decided to end their programs in the camps. These decisions were put into effect at the end of 1995.