

CLINTON IN AFRICA: THE OVERVIEW

CLINTON IN AFRICA: THE OVERVIEW; CLINTON DECLARES U.S., WITH WORLD, FAILED RWANDANS

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President Clinton came here today to talk to scarred and mutilated survivors of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and to acknowledge that the world could have protected them, though it did not.

"We in the United States and the world community did not do as much as we could have and should have done to try to limit what occurred in Rwanda in 1994," the President told half a dozen people here who lost parents, siblings and children during three months of ethnic mass killing that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives.

After listening to the victims' stories of hiding among blood-soaked corpses, of being sliced with machetes, and of watching hundreds die, Mr. Clinton said in a later speech that "we cannot change the past," but that nations should learn from it. [Excerpts, page A12.]

Both in his meeting with the victims and the speech to an invited audience here, Mr. Clinton called for sharper vigilance against genocide and swifter prosecution of its perpetrators in a new permanent international criminal court.

He told the survivors, who gathered at the airport here, that the international community was not organized to deal with such violence.

"And we're still not organized to deal with it," he continued, citing as another example from his years in office the slow reaction to ethnic killing in Bosnia. Mr. Clinton said it took his Administration "more than two years" to reach consensus internally and with American allies "to go in and stop all that killing."

In April 1994, the United States decided to take no action in Rwanda, fearing the risks outweighed the potential rewards. The decision was codified in a Presidential directive, signed by Mr. Clinton the following month, which limited American participation in international peacekeeping operations.

And in those months, while the massacres were raging, the Clinton Administration successfully argued against a United Nations effort that, in retrospect, might have saved hundreds of thousands of lives, according to United Nations officers, former Administration officials and human-rights advocates. [Page A12.]

Representative Maxine Waters, a California Democrat who is traveling with the President, said Mr. Clinton felt guilty that the United States had not intervened early on to halt the Rwandan genocide. But in his speech here, the President did not go as far as he did in his talk with the survivors toward accepting blame for the United States.

In the speech, delivered to a couple of hundred diplomats and Rwandan Government officials, Mr. Clinton did not single out the United States, but said that the "international community, together with nations in Africa, must bear its share of responsibility for this tragedy, as well."

He called the genocide, which he said resulted in at least a million deaths in 90 days, "the most intensive slaughter in this blood-filled century we are about to leave."

Mr. Clinton repeatedly said that the genocide was planned. "It is important that the world know that these killings were not spontaneous or accidental," he said.

As at other stops on his 12-day tour, Mr. Clinton was greeted here by dancers and drummers as he arrived in a drizzle at the airport, which rests among hills quilted with dark green forests and light green fields. Two little girls in white dresses presented him with flowers. But the tone of the President's visit was pensive, and often sad.

The Clinton Administration had planned this trip as an upbeat tour of African nations with growing economies and strengthening democracies. In advance of the President's appearance today, officials said that Mr. Clinton would acknowledge inaction by the world, but not specifically by the United States, to stop the Rwanda massacres.

But they appear to have underestimated Mr. Clinton's signature willingness to empathize with suffering, and he went further than they expected, at least in his impromptu remarks to survivors. The White House permitted one newspaper reporter to attend the meeting as a representative of the press corps.

Mr. Clinton's remarks today followed a speech in Uganda on Tuesday in which he departed from his prepared text to express regret for American failures in Africa, from benefiting from the slave trade to dealing with dictators.

The United States was more resistant than some of its European allies to putting a large United Nations force in Rwanda after leaders of the majority ethnic group here, the Hutu, began a campaign to wipe out a minority, the Tutsi, in April 1994. The Clinton Administration had just been scalded by its peace mission in Somalia, in which 18 American soldiers died.

Tutsi rebels, operating from bases in Uganda, succeeded in replacing the Hutu regime that year with what is essentially a military government. The President here, Pasteur Bizimungu, is a Hutu, and the Clinton Administration is persuaded that the Tutsi-dominated Government is bent on national reconciliation and democracy.

But the genocide still reverberates here. Hutu insurgents are fighting in the northwest, and Rwandan troops have been accused of killing civilians in reprisals for their raids.

"Our post-genocidal society is fragile," warned President Bizimungu, in a speech in which he thanked Mr. Clinton for his "commitment to helping our people overcome the ravages of genocide." He said that in judging the progress of Rwanda, other nations should treat it as a "special case."

As he listened to the survivors' stories, the President appeared moved, thanking some in a voice choked with emotion. Venuste Karasira was among nearly 4,000 people who took refuge during the genocide in a school protected by Belgian paratroopers. But the troops were withdrawn; Hutu militia members entered the school and killed all but 400 of those hiding there.

"I had to find some dead corpses," said Mr. Karasira, who lost his right hand in the attack. "I swim in their blood to survive." He added, "We died because we were left by the United Nations soldiers." When he finished, Mr. Clinton appeared unable to speak. He simply nodded for the next account.

One of those who met with Mr. Clinton, Gloriosa Uwimpuhwe, said later that he "behaved as a real, real human being who felt what people were saying, even though he did not see it himself." Ms. Uwimpuhwe said that she considered Mr. Clinton's acknowledgment of United States inaction to be an apology. "He said that he not only is sorry, but he's looking forward to taking positive options for the future," she said.

The audience for his subsequent speech enthusiastically greeted Mr. Clinton today, and interrupted him with applause each time he acknowledged error by the international community.

Several Rwandans here said that the United States, like other nations, should have acted earlier to stop the genocide, but they seemed less interested in pointing fingers than in moving on. "Everybody is to blame," said Sam Nkusi, a government official. He said that "to feel the President of the United States shares our sadness and the tragedy with us is very good."

Rwanda was added late to Mr. Clinton's tour. Administration officials said Secret Service nervousness, not White House fears of addressing genocide, delayed the decision. After analyzing the situation here, the Secret Service agreed to a Presidential visit, officials said. But Mr. Clinton did not leave the airport during his three and a half hours here, and the engines of Air Force One never ceased idling. [Mr. Clinton arrived in Cape Town, South Africa, early Thursday, Reuters reported.]

To the disappointment of some Rwandan officials, Mr. Clinton did not even visit the genocide memorial built at the airport in advance of his visit. The Secret Service considered the site, on a hillock, to be too exposed to the surrounding hills, said Michael D. McCurry, the White House spokesman.

In his speech, Mr. Clinton pointed to three errors by the international community: not acting quickly to halt the killing; permitting refugee camps in neighboring Zaire to become havens for Hutu killers, and not immediately labeling the slaughter "genocide."

Although the killing here was widely reported, Mr. Clinton suggested that he did not appreciate its magnitude at the time. "All over the world there were people like me sitting in offices, day after day after day, who did not fully appreciate the depth and the speed with which you were being engulfed by this unimaginable terror."

But Mr. Clinton looked to the future as well. "We must have global vigilance," he said. "And never again must we be shy in the face of the evidence."

The President said that "at the dawn of the new millennium there is only one crucial division" among people, and it was not that between Hutu and Tutsi or Arabs and Jews. "It is really the line between those who embrace the common humanity we all share and those who reject it."

Mr. Clinton then looked up and declared with emotion: "When you look at those children who greeted us as we got off that plane today, how could anyone say they did not want those children to have a chance to have their own children? To experience the joy of another

morning sunrise? To learn the normal lessons of life? To give something back to their people?"

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