

Officials Told to Avoid Calling Rwanda Killings 'Genocide'

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Trying to avoid the rise of moral pressure to stop the mass killing in Rwanda, the Clinton Administration has instructed its spokesmen not to describe the deaths there as genocide, even though some senior officials believe that is exactly what they represent.

That decision has left the Administration at odds with the Secretary General of the United Nations and a cast of distinguished experts who say there is no doubt that the violence, which is said to have killed at least 200,000 people and perhaps as many as 400,000, is part of the deliberate and widespread extermination of an ethnic group.

But American officials say that so stark a label could inflame public calls for action the Administration is unwilling to take. Rather than compare the massacre with, for example, the deaths under the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the State Department and the National Security Council have drafted guidance instructing spokesmen to say merely that "acts of genocide may have occurred."

While no memorandum explicitly prohibits a broader denunciation, Administration officials say they recognize the guidance as a boundary on their public pronouncements. Lives and Dollars

That caution appears to reflect the attitude of an Administration that has become deeply wary of new entanglements abroad, particularly in cases like Rwanda, a landlocked African country to which the United States has no historic ties. Without oil or other resources as a rationale, the case for military intervention would have to be based on whether ending the killing is worth the cost in American lives and dollars.

Still, with independent witnesses providing detailed accounts of organized killings of members of the minority Tutsi ethnic group by the majority Hutus, some senior American officials acknowledge that the Administration's public posture reflects a certain lack of candor.

"Genocide is a word that carries an enormous amount of responsibility," a senior Administration official said this week. If the United States joined in describing the killings as genocide, the official and others said, it would be natural -- and unwelcome -- for voters to expect that the response would include dispatching troops.

Under the 1948 Genocide Convention, the United States and other signers are supposed to respond to genocide by investigating and punishing those who are responsible. Some critics have suggested that the White House may be seeking to evade the obligations of that accord.

But Administration officials say they believe the treaty does not carry an absolute obligation to act. Instead, those who defend the policy argue that the first obligation before joining in so unequivocal a castigation is to be absolutely sure of the facts.

"As a responsible Government, you don't just go around hollering 'genocide,' " David Rawson, the United States Ambassador to Rwanda, said in an interview. "You say that acts of genocide may have occurred and they need to be investigated." Cries of Hypocrisy

Diplomacy is not famous for haste or blunt truths, and American Administrations have proven slow in denouncing slaughter in Central Africa, including the tribal massacres in Burundi last fall. It was only this month that the State Department agreed to establish an office to look into what the Administration now portrays as five years of genocide under Pol Pot in Cambodia that ended 15 years ago.

But with Rwanda a gruesome feature of international news coverage since early April, those troubled by international passivity have begun to lash out with particular venom at what they describe as the Administration's hypocrisy.

Herman Cohen, a former Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, used an op-ed article in The Washington Post last week to lambaste the Clinton Administration for what he called its "wimpish approach" in Rwanda. Mr. Cohen declared flatly that the killings there "must be called genocide."

"Another Holocaust may just have slipped by, hardly noticed," Mr. Cohen wrote.

Geraldine Ferraro, who headed a United States delegation to a special session convened by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, used the less than categorical language on May 25 to outline the American position. A day later, the State Department described the question of whether genocide was being committed in Rwanda as one that is "under very active consideration."

But Mr. Rawson said this week the Administration intended to await a United Nations report which is not scheduled for four weeks. Political as Well as Ethnic

Because the bloodshed has been rooted in political as well as ethnic tensions, sorting out the killings could prove complicated. Witnesses have said Tutsis were the victims of the worst violence, much of it carried out systematically by Government troops and Hutu militias, but Hutus have been killed in reprisal and in battles with the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Tutsi-led rebel group that now controls half of Rwanda.

The Administration's cautious language nevertheless mirrors the standoffishness the United States has adopted since the killing began on April 6, after President Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, died in a suspicious plane crash.

Seeing Rwanda as a first test of its restrictive new guidelines on peacekeeping, the Administration has not only ruled out sending American troops but has stood in the way of an aggressive United Nations plan to dispatch an African force of 5,500.

The Defense Department has agreed to lease some 46 M-113 armored personnel carriers to the United Nations for use by Ghanaian troops, but the schedule for delivering the vehicles has slowed the deployment. Even the precise mission is undefined, in large part because the United States insisted on a more cautious mandate for the troops than other nations did.