

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay on the International Day of Reflection on the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda

Twenty years after the beginning of the genocide in Rwanda, the horror has not diminished. As a former judge for over eight years on the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), I am still haunted by the testimony I heard from victims and witnesses, of the brutal violence, the killings, rapes and maiming.

The figures are so vast that they are difficult to fathom. More than 800,000 dead and many more injured, scarred, orphaned, widowed and severely traumatised. We must remember, on this day, that each of those individuals experienced unthinkable atrocities – the mothers who saw their children being butchered by their neighbours, the children forced to hide under cover of dead bodies in order to survive.

On this anniversary, we must reflect not only on the massive scale of the killings and other atrocities during those 100 days of genocide, but also on what led to the annihilation of social values, and law and order, which allowed genocide to occur.

As well as examining why the horrific violations took place, we must continue to reflect on our collective failure to stop them. At the ICTR, we made a point of ensuring that our judgements laid out the root causes of the genocide, which were grounded in the manipulation and exploitation of ethnic differences by political and military leaders. It is crucial on this day to reflect on how the ethnic tensions were slowly and steadily stoked by such leaders, as well as media such as Radio Mille Collines, until the country exploded into mass violence.

The ICTR's judgements also acknowledged many instances when Hutus risked their lives to protect Tutsis from the tide of genocide sweeping across the country. And the question remains, why do some people manage to resist the collective frenzy, and why do so many others fail to do so, or zealously take an active role in it? It is not simply a question of bravery.

We must ensure that we persist with efforts to bring perpetrators to justice, both within Rwanda and outside. Impunity adds insult to the grave injury, physical and emotional, suffered by the victims. It is important to note that shortly after the genocide, the new Government of Rwanda itself prioritised justice and accountability, not least by asking the Security Council to establish an international tribunal. They recognised that justice and accountability are indispensable for long-term stability.

We must support Rwandan efforts to ensure the promotion and protection of human

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rights for all, and efforts to move towards reconciliation and rehabilitation.

We must also reflect, on this day, upon the adequacy of our efforts to resolve current human rights crises, both in their embryonic and their advanced stages, so that we are not doomed to go on repeating the chronic failures of the past.

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Learn more about the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay:
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/AboutUs/Pages/HighCommissioner.aspx>

For more information or media requests, please contact Rupert Colville (+ 41 22 917 9767 / rcolville@ohchr.org) or Ravina Shamdasani (+41 22 917 9169 / rshamdasani@ohchr.org) or Cécile Pouilly (+41 22 917 9310 / cpouilly@ohchr.org).

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