

To our great shame, 'Canada doesn't do Africa'

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Some seven weeks into the 1994 Rwanda genocide, perhaps 500,000 Rwandan Tutsis had been murdered, maimed or raped by Hutu extremists determined to win sole control over the tiny nation. That an unmitigated genocide was in process was doubted by no one, and acknowledged formally by no Western government.

To that date, like the rest of the world, the Canadian government had been a passive bystander to the Rwandan tragedy, despite pleas for support from Canadian general Roméo Dallaire. Gen. Dallaire was the commander of the United Nations mission to Rwanda. As he reports in his memoir, two senior Canadian officials -- Robert Fowler, then deputy minister of defence, and Admiral Larry Murray -- flew into the country for a 24-hour visit to assess the situation for themselves.

That's all the Dallaire book tells us. In fact, Mr. Fowler was so shaken by what he learned that he poured his heart into a 17-page cri de coeur, pleading with the Chrétien government to send Gen. Dallaire the reinforcements he desperately needed. Mr. Fowler's passionate memo was duly passed along the government's chain of command. When it was last seen, there was a handwritten comment in the margin: "Canada doesn't do Africa." Canada never intervened to help stop this most easily preventable of genocides. No rich country did.

The shock of this story is that Canadians and Africans alike believed then, as they do now, that Canada does "do" Africa. Just as medicare is the embodiment of Canadians' sense of their values at home, so humanitarian aid and peacekeeping represents our sense of self abroad. The truth, alas, shatters the self-satisfied myth.

Rather than being a world leader, as of the end of June, 18 countries contributed more personnel to UN peacekeeping operations than Canada.

As for official development assistance, of 22 OECD countries -- the richest nations in the world - - Canada ranks a mediocre 12th, based on 2002 data. Most Canadians never knew that Paul Martin's signal accomplishment as finance minister, the elimination of the deficit, was facilitated by massive cuts to our foreign aid budget. Canada's standing pledge, routinely renewed by the government, is to dedicate 0.7 per cent of gross national product to official development assistance. Instead, the Chrétien-Martin government budgeted the lowest percentage in decades - - 0.28 per cent in 2002, compared to Denmark's 0.96 per cent, Norway's 0.91 per cent, the Netherlands' 0.82 per cent and Sweden's 0.74 per cent. Even with recent increases, official development assistance remains under 0.3 per cent. At this rate, Canada won't meet its commitment to the world's poorest citizens for another 35 years.

Canadians will also be surprised that the first- and second-largest recipients of Canadian aid these days are Afghanistan and Iraq. These two countries, with 50 million people, receive half of our entire official development assistance. The other half goes to the rest of the world, including Africa's 800 million people.

Now the world is focused on Darfur in Sudan, the worst humanitarian disaster on Earth. "Another Rwanda," as it's routinely described. Human-rights and aid agencies tried to draw attention to Darfur throughout 2003. No one who counted paid attention. Meantime, many thousands died, many thousands of girls and women were raped, and hundreds of thousands became refugees. Earlier this year, Darfur finally captured the imagination of the media and, as a result, the attention of the world's powers. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan actually visited the region at the end of June. Many demands followed, while more people died.

Last week, a month later, a resolution was at last passed at the Security Council giving the government of Sudan another month before consideration is given to taking action of some kind, some time after that. Meantime, more die in Darfur.

Reputable voices describe a genocide in progress or imminent, while the world depends on a treacherous government of war criminals to stop the killing, burning and rape.

Where is Canada's voice?

There is mostly the conspicuous sound of silence. We are apparently fighting the scourge of genocide with sporadic, even rare, press releases -- two from the Department of Foreign Affairs in the past month and one from CIDA. The Minister of International Co-operation actually boasts that Canada is giving \$14.6-million "to alleviate the suffering" in Darfur; the UN reports that \$180-million is required. A government member insists that the Prime Minister and ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence are meeting "practically every day" on the crisis. If so, these are uncharacteristically invisible politicians.

We have the right to be skeptical. Despite all the "lessons learned" from Rwanda, there is reason to fear that Canada still doesn't do Africa.

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