

Reflection on the 1994 Rwanda Genocide

Kofi Annan

A special meeting was held on 7th April, 2004 at the Assembly Hall of the Palais des Nations, Geneva to observe the International day of Reflection on the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda. We are reproducing the extracts of the speech delivered by UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan on this occasion.

First, we must all acknowledge our responsibility for not having done more to prevent or stop the genocide.

Neither the United Nations Secretariat, nor Security Council, nor Member States in general, nor the international media, paid enough attention to the gathering signs of disaster. Still less did we take timely action.

When we recall such events and ask “why did no one intervene?”, we should address the question not only to the United Nations, or even to its Member States. No one can claim ignorance. All who were playing any part in world affairs at that time should ask, “what more could I have done? How would I react next time - and what am I doing now to make it less likely there will be a next time?”

Perhaps more than any others, those questions have dominated my thoughts, since I became Secretary-General. If there is one legacy I would most wish to leave to my successors, it is an Organization both better equipped to prevent genocide, and able to act decisively to stop it when prevention fails.

Let me summarise the plan under the five headings:

First, preventing armed conflict

Genocide almost always occurs during war. Even apparently tolerant individuals, once they engage in war, have categorized some of their fellow human beings as enemies, suspending the taboo which forbids the deliberate taking of human life. And in almost all cases they accept that civilians may also be killed or hurt, whatever efforts are made to limit so-called “collateral damage”.

Unless we are very careful, this can be the beginning of a swift descent into a different moral universe, where whole communities are designated as the enemy, and their lives held to be of no account. And from there, it is only one more step to the actual and deliberate elimination of these communities: one more step, in other words, to genocide.

So one of the best ways to reduce the chances of genocide is to address the causes of conflict.

The plan will therefore embrace, and expand, the recommendations already made in my report on Prevention of Armed Conflict, which have been endorsed by both the Security Council and the General Assembly.

We must help countries strengthen their capacity to prevent conflict, at local and national levels.

We must do more at the regional level, to prevent conflict spilling over from one country to another.

We must give greater attention to environmental problems and tensions related to competition over natural resources.

We must work together with the international financial institutions, with civil society, and with the private sector, to ensure that young people get the chance to better themselves through education and peaceful employment, so that they are less easily recruited into predatory gangs and militias.

We must protect the rights of minorities, since they are genocide's most frequent targets.

By all these means, and more, we must attack the roots of violence and