



## France-Rwanda Reconciliation Follows Genocide Report

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In March, a commission of historians commissioned by President Emmanuel Macron to study France's role before and during the Rwandan genocide in 1994 published the results of their research. Its conclusions were critical of France and well-received in Rwanda. That paved the way for the first visit to Rwanda in a decade by the French leader. The end of more than 25 years of mutual hostility will bring political benefits to both sides. The historians' report contributes to the discussion about the future of humanitarian interventions.

**France and Genocide.** The mass killings of the Tutsi population in Francophone Rwanda (April-July 1994) in which around 800,000 people were murdered at the hands of pro-government extremist Hutu militias constituted the greatest crime of genocide since World War II. The events in Rwanda resonate heavily in France to this day. In the years preceding and during the genocide, France was the closest ally of the Rwandan ruling Hutu regime, despite its criminal nature. The role of the UN-authorized French military humanitarian operation *Turquoise* (June-August 1994) was particularly controversial. Its soldiers often remained passive in the face of mass crimes, and the security zone established by the French became an escape channel for the perpetrators of the genocide. Some of its leaders, such as the wife of former President Juvenal Habyarimana, still live in France today. Authorities from the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the group that stopped the genocide and took power in 1994, blamed France for complicity in the crimes. In turn, the French authorities in the 1990s relativised the Tutsi genocide, for example, by referring to the activities of the RPF in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) also as genocide. Disputes over recent history remained unresolved due to the unavailability of key French archives.

**Duclert Commission.** To establish the role of France in Rwanda between 1990 and 1994, President Macron established an independent commission of nine historians chaired by Vincent Duclert. It gained exceptional access to the archives of the presidential administration to examine

previously non-public sources. However, the records were incomplete, for example, documents from the French embassy in Rwanda from the 1990s had been destroyed.

In its final report, published on 26 March, the Commission said that France failed "institutionally and morally" in Rwanda. It pointed to the significance of the personal bond between then President François Mitterrand and his Rwandan counterpart. As a result, the administration at Elysée Palace became the behind-the-scenes decision-making centre, which interfered on Rwanda in the activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the French armed forces. This centre was unable to abandon the perception of the radicalising Hutu regime as an ally in the fight against the "hostile" RFP during the civil war (1990-1994) and the subsequent genocide. In Duclert's opinion, Mitterrand's entourage saw in the RPF, formed by Tutsi refugees in Uganda, a rival Anglo-Saxon worldview. They believed that by fighting the RPF they were defending the weakening position of the Francophonie in Rwanda and, more broadly, in Africa. By sticking to this post-colonial perspective, the French disregarded signals of preparation for the genocide. While the report's authors found no evidence of French involvement in the crimes, they attributed France "overwhelming responsibility" to the events that led to the genocide (Macron repeated this phrase during his visit to Rwanda on 27 May). Duclert also defended the legacy of *Operation Turquoise*, pointing out that, despite its initial omissions, it was the only foreign force present and that it attempted to save Tutsis.

**Reaction in Rwanda.** For most of the period after 1994, the Rwandan authorities led by President Paul Kagame (RPF) treated France with hostility. Interstate contacts were sporadic. After a French court issued an arrest warrant for RPF leaders in 2006 in the case of the assassination of Habyarimana in 1994, which precipitated the start of the genocide, Rwanda completely severed diplomatic relations with France for three years.

In April this year, the Rwandan government published its own report on the same matter, on commission to the American law firm Levy Firestone Muse, which included about 250 accounts by witnesses. Its authors argue with Duclert's conclusions that the French authorities did not notice the signals of the impending genocide and point to an auxiliary role for France and the perpetrators (which may have legal consequences). However, when it comes to their statements of historical facts, both publications are similar. The Rwandan foreign minister assessed that for the first time the states had come to a "shared view of the past", which would allow them to start a "new relationship" in political and economic terms. This attitude is understandable in view of the waning support among Kagame's allies, especially the U.S. and the EU. In 2013, the U.S. suspended military cooperation with Rwanda in response to ties between its armed forces and the M23 guerrillas who forcibly recruit child soldiers in the DRC. The EU has on several occasions considered sanctions on Rwanda for violating political freedoms. In February this year, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the Rwandan authorities for abducting from Dubai and charging with terrorism a well-known critic of Kagame, human rights activist Paul Rusesabagina, who has Belgian citizenship.

**Significance to the Debate on International Military Interventions.** After Rwanda (and the massacre in Bosnian Srebrenica in 1995), the institution of "humanitarian intervention" developed, for example, the NATO operation in Yugoslavia to protect the Albanian population of Kosovo (1999) or the intervention of the African Union (AU) in Sudan's Darfur region (2004). These interventions were accompanied by a conviction that new norms of international law were shaping that justified, in exceptional cases, the violation of state sovereignty, such as the "duty of non-indifference" (AU) or "responsibility to protect" (UN). In France, the argument to avoid the Rwandan errors—especially inaction—was relevant to later decisions on military operations, for example, in Libya (2011) or the Central African Republic (CAR, 2013).

The conclusions of the Duclert report may influence the shaping of future interventions for the protection of

civilians due to its critical analysis of the errors in the assumptions and course of the French mission of 1994. These include the dominance of humanitarian or stabilisation actions by a state deeply involved with one of the parties to the conflict (for example, in Chad as part of the UN-authorized AU mission to the CAR in 2013-2014). It also points to the consequences of improper diagnosis of the nature of a crisis, such as attributing excessive influence to external factors (e.g., a competition between world powers) or the use of misleading analogies. As a result of these mistakes, the intervening party loses interest in understanding the local dynamics, becomes de-sensitised to civilian needs, and its actions on the ground can be harmful. This was visible in the Brazilian contingent of UN forces in Haiti in 2005, which were accused of applying collective responsibility to civilians deemed sympathetic to warlords. The Brazilians in Haiti replicated the patterns of abuse used in the fight against organised crime in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Like the French in 1994, they lacked preparation for humanitarian action.

**Conclusions and Perspectives.** The appointment of the Duclert commission and an earlier, separate team tasked with inventorying cultural goods robbed from colonies are among Macron's initiatives to investigate the [dark pages of French history in Africa](#). This gives political importance to settling accounts from the past and redefining France's role today on the continent. This is necessary because of the loss of influence in some of France's traditional bridgeheads (e.g., the CAR) and the systematic decline in trust in the country on the continent despite its development and business commitments (\$ 60 billion in turnover). France hopes that its recent actions, including the Paris summit of 18 May on the economic recovery of Africa after the COVID-19 pandemic and President Macron's visit on 27 May to Rwanda—today one of the [continent's centres for the development of new technologies](#)—will mark the reversal of the negative trend. For Rwanda, reconciliation with France is key to regaining external support strained by mounting criticism from other Western partners. It can also be beneficial for Poland in developing political contacts (a visit by the Rwandan foreign minister to Poland took place also in May), as well as in cooperation on cybersecurity and higher education.

The Duclert Commission report also contributes to the global reflection on the future of military missions, especially those undertaken for humanitarian reasons, so that they do not aggravate conflicts in the long term. This will be useful for the EU in planning engagement in Mozambique, most likely in the form of a training mission.