French arms, war and genocide in Rwanda

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Abstract. France is now the world’s second largest arms exporter, and the largest supplier of weapons to the developing world. The record of France’s involvement in Rwanda from 1990 to 1994 has motivated the NGO lobby within France to subject French government policy – towards the developing world in general, and on arms supplies in particular – to unprecedented scrutiny. Accordingly, the level and volume of criticism of French involvement in Rwanda resulted in the first ever parliamentary commission to scrutinise French military activity overseas, although this and other official inquiries stopped short of identifying arms supplies as instrumental in exacerbating the Rwandan crisis. A consideration of French arms supplies to Rwanda can offer a template by which to measure the nature and degree of France’s support for the Habyarimana regime which planned, and the Sindikubwabo interim government which oversaw, the 1994 genocide in that country. Moreover, French arms supplies after France’s own and the UN’s arms embargo demonstrate how a process of unchecked militarisation may involve the supplier as well as the supplied in illegality.

Introduction

The Rwandan genocide of 1994 marked a watershed for French civil society, notably those Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and individuals who had been to the forefront in advocating humanitarianism as a defining component of their country’s foreign and development policy. France, uniquely in Europe, prides itself on having a global humanitarian mission, and evidence that this “homeland of human rights” was implicated in genocide through its military support until 1994 for the extremist regime in Rwanda shocked many who had applauded the declared pro-democracy, pro-humanitarian stance of President Mitterrand since 1981. Indeed, Mitterrand had been the first to appoint a Minister for Humanitarian Action in the person of Médecins sans frontières co-founder Bernard Kouchner, France’s most prominent advocate of the right or duty of humanitarian intervention.

The unprecedented creation in 1997 of a parliamentary commission to investigate France’s role in Rwanda, presided by socialist deputy, former defence minister and chairman of the National Assembly’s defence committee Paul Quilès, was seen as a direct result of the pressure generated by civil society, notably NGOs, some journalists and a number of academics, who had raised serious questions about the degree and extent of French support for the Habyarimana regime which planned and the Sindikubwabo interim
government which oversaw the 1994 genocide. Yet the overwhelmingly military nature of this support, through training and major arms transfers from France to Rwanda, was not exceptional in the overall context of French military involvement in Africa over four decades and five presidencies since decolonisation. Yet many new NGOs, seeking to identify the cause and effect of French policy in the developing world in general and Africa in particular, emerged in France as a direct result of these events, notably Agir ici, Survie, l’Observatoire permanent de la Coopération française and l’Observatoire des transferts d’armements. The latter’s newsletter noted, when the Quilès Commission’s report was published in December 1998, that: “The implication of France in this tragedy, already denounced by NGOs, is thus confirmed. The Parliamentary Commission was forced to yield to this pressure from civil society, while attempting to diminish France’s responsibility. The details on arms sales nonetheless speak volumes”.3

The Quilès Commission4 and other reports published to date – by the Belgian Senate5 and the UN Security Council6 – may represent an attempt to draw a line under the débâcle of the international response to the Rwandan genocide. However, all of these officially-sanctioned reports have failed to address the issue of the source of weapons supplies, although control of such supplies was identified in the UN report as key to preventing and defusing conflicts in Africa.

Crucially, it may be seen from the Rwandan case study that illegality in arms transfers flows from originally “legal” arms supplies, and that states overwhelmingly are the suppliers of new weaponry to civil conflicts. Boutwell and Klare have identified this “legal export from the major supplier states” as one of three factors along with domestic manufacture and black-market sales which have resulted in the circulation of “literally hundreds of millions” of small arms and light weapons throughout the world.7

War and genocide in Rwanda

It is now accepted by all except its perpetrators and their supporters that the Rwandan genocide of 1994, which resulted in the deaths of at least 800,000 people in three months, was one of the largest-scale crimes of the twentieth century. However, unlike the century’s other genocides or mass politically-motivated killings – of Armenians, Jews and Cambodians – it is commonly assumed that the Rwandan genocide was spontaneous and conducted by a frenzied population armed with machetes, an impression created by much media coverage which typically fed stereotypes and reinforced Western prejudices that “Africa is a place of darkness, where furious savages clobber each other on the head to assuage their dark ancestral bloodlusts”.8 Two of