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Eyewitness to a Genocide: The United Nations and Rwanda (with a new Afterward)

Michael Barnett

Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2016

256 Pages; Price: \$22.95 Paperback

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As a staff member of the United States Mission to the United Nations (UN) throughout 1993 and 1994, Michael Barnett observed his government's and the UN's handling of the Rwandan genocide. Now a professor at the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, he has pondered and further analyzed the place of humanitarianism in the world order. As such, Barnett is an unusual combination of an insider with a moral conscience and an academic painstakingly researching a complicated situation. Adding archival research and interviews to his first-hand experiences, he lays out the history of UN involvement in Rwanda. He roundly, and sadly, exposes the UN's "sins of omission" and moral responsibility for the deaths of hundreds of thousands. He questions the detached culture of the UN, particularly its Security Council, which at the time included delegates from the murderous regime in Kigali.

Barnett's introduction explains the moral and ethical framework of both those who committed the genocide in Africa and those in New York, and elsewhere within the UN system, who were responsible for the international community's failures. Continuing to build the background, Chapter One, "It Was a Very Good Year," looks at the UN in the early 1990s when the world body basked in the successful conclusion of the Cold War, Cambodia's reconstruction, and the rapid expansion of peace keeping activities. However, by the beginning of 1993, conflicts in Bosnia and Somalia had deflated earlier optimism. Increasingly UN officials "took greater care to protect the organization's interests, reputation, and future."¹

His second chapter, "Rwanda through Rose-Colored Glasses," provides the African background necessary to understand events by surveying the various forces competing for power. Refocusing on UN activities, it provides details of the 1993 Arusha Accords and the peacekeeping activities immediately after its signing. Ominously, it also notes the impact of the ill-fated UN intervention in Somalia, where the humiliating deaths of American peacekeepers profoundly affected the US government, particularly the incoming Clinton administration.

"If This Is an Easy Operation..." the third chapter, examines the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR), from the October 1993 resolution which established it until the extension of its mandate on April 5, 1994, the day before the genocide began. Not seen as newsworthy by the rest of the world, this vitally important period was characterized in Rwanda by extremist rhetoric, growing violence and frustration on the part of UN commanders, while officials in Washington and New York were increasingly questioning UN peacekeeping in general and UNAMIR's mission in particular.

While Barnett doesn't set out to describe the genocide in detail, indeed many others have, his fourth chapter, "The Fog of Genocide," begins with the April 6, 1994 downing of the jet carrying the Rwandan and Burundian Presidents home from negotiations in Arusha. Searches, assassinations and massacres by vigilantes occurred within minutes. Meanwhile in New York,

¹ Michael Barnett, *Eyewitness to a Genocide: The United Nations and Rwanda (with a new Afterward)*(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 48.

the UN failed to respond. In fact the international community reduced its commitment. With the subsequent breakdown of order and the torture and murder of Belgian peacekeepers, UNAMIR's troops were cut from over 1,200 to a mere 270. Key members of the Security Council were unwilling to risk lives, money and reputations in a troubled faraway land where little seemed to be a stake. Barnett noted,

The resurrection of the UN after the Cold War was driven by the desire not only to re-sharpen a forgotten tool for peace and security, but also to recapture an ideal. Because of a combination of exuberance, naiveté, and expedience, the council had deployed peacekeepers to places where there was no peace to keep, and with inadequate resources and unrealistic mandates.²

Chapter 5, "Diplomatic Games" examines the Security Council's discussions on Rwanda as the situation unfolded. Much time was spent determining if it was merely civil war or something more relevant to international attention. But the numbers coming out of Rwanda were scarcely believable. Barnett notes, "The killing defies imagination."³ Yet, for weeks, the Security Council debated whether the situation met the exact legal definition of genocide. Even after the scale of the killing became clear, no major power was willing to act. Should the UN intervene? Who would volunteer? How they be equipped and paid? These difficult questions were discussed in excruciating detail, but never answered. Instead of stepping forward with solutions, the world community at its highest levels chose to evade responsibility. These hollow exchanges were the core of Barnett's own personal experience, which in turn shaped his burning need to expose the situation by publishing his account. Much to the consternation of human rights activists, and increasingly Barnett himself, the Security Council embarked on a grotesque series of discussions in which the delegation representing the perpetrators was accorded all of the niceties of diplomatic etiquette without being called to account. The UN was embarrassed further by supporting the July 1994 French military intervention, which actually shielded *génocidaires*.

The sixth and final chapter, "The Hunt for Moral Responsibility," is a soul-searching indictment of both the UN and the major powers who dominate it. Since 1995, many prominent world leaders have gone to Rwanda to pay their respects. While many acknowledged the system's failures and millions in aid was forthcoming, these visits were characterized by a disappointing and hypocritical lack of contrition or remorse. UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali was quick to note that he was the first to publically use the word "genocide" to describe the situation, albeit a month late. Concentrating on domestic affairs first, then mid-term elections and finally the distractions of the Monica Lewinsky affair, the Clinton administration succeeded in evading pressures to intervene and even discouraged others from doing so. Barnett records the many excuses and evasions of responsibility that characterized most in the world community. The major powers and UN were in the throes of a bout of compassion fatigue. This led to what the author aptly described as "selective Samaritanism." The chapter ends with an analysis of how the global community can build truly moral institutions. He thoughtfully recognizes the pitfalls of humanitarianism, but also passionately advocates for its pursuit. Here and elsewhere in his book, Barnett recognizes the honorable role played by UN commander Canadian general Romeo Dallaire, who he describes as "a figure worthy of Greek tragedy."

² Ibid., 128.

³ Ibid., 131.

The afterward added to the 2016 edition of Barnett's 2002 work includes his reactions to documents released on the genocide's 25th anniversary. While the author concentrated on events in New York in his original work, he notes the importance of events in Arusha. He questions institutional approaches to genocide and presses the need for accountability. Two useful appendices provide chronologies of events in Rwanda between 1885 and July 1994 and major developments in the UN's Security Agenda from August 1988 to May 1994.

Barnett's views as an insider makes *Eyewitness to a Genocide* a truly outstanding book, which deftly combines the professionalism of a scholar, the record of an important witness and the anguish of a human being offended by the unconscionable. His observations and analysis have been unaffected by the polite sterility of diplomatic discourse. Another great strength of this work is his nuanced analysis of the haunting failures of the international system. An important addition to all library collections on international relations, Genocide/Holocaust studies, human rights and African studies, his unique account is essential reading for historians, researchers, legal scholars, agency personnel, human rights activists and anyone interested in promoting and institutionalizing humanitarianism on a global level.