A BYSTANDER TO GENOCIDE[1]: REVISITING UN FAILURE IN THE BALKANS AND RWANDA

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Abstract

      Against the backdrop of high expectations from the international community on the United Nations in the wake of the end of the Cold War and Super Power rivalries which had encumbered its performance over the years as a global institution capable of enthroning peace, this study revisits two episodes generally regarded as low points in the UN's avowed peace purpose and efforts. Using a case study approach, the study interrogates the UN's initiatives at Bosnia and Rwanda and concludes that in these instances, the global body failed institutionally to stop mass murders, rapes as well as destruction and desecration of cultural heritages. Indeed, it is argued strongly here that in Bosnia and Rwanda, the UN was merely, to borrow the words of Samantha Power,' a bystander to genocide'.

Keywords: Genocide, UN, Bystander, Rwanda, Rape, Mass Murder, Failure, the Balkans

Introduction

      The United Nations (UN) proved a failure specifically on its security responsibility since the Balkan Wars, particularly within the period of the first decade of the end of the Cold War. With the end of the Cold War it was expected that the UN can at last act to fulfill the vision of its founders and become a dependable instrument for the maintenance of international peace and security (Feldman 1991). Indeed as stated in the preamble of its Charter, the UN was conceived to:

> *'save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of*

international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom…' [2]

However, this was not to be, as the last decades of the last century witnessed grave carnage around the world, so that it has been labeled as the 'age of genocide' (Stoett 1994). As intra-state conflicts increased, the UNs inability to stem destruction and colossal loss of lives affected its reputation and diminished public perception of its peacekeeping missions (McCarten 2012). Considering that the UN came into being to, in the opening words of its Charter, 'save succeeding generations from the scourge of war', a security concern that stems from the carnage and devastation of the Second World War, which subsequently influenced its designers to mid-wife an organization that will serve as a framework for global cooperative problem solving with its core responsibility being, the promotion of international peace and security (Heywood 2011, Nye and Welch 2013), then, the picture we have seen for the more than half a century of its existence is that, the UN has struggled to meet this responsibility and challenge. It has in the process recorded instances of glaring failures and modest gains, a record that at best can be described, in terms of its overall performance, as a mixed bag of grave failures and commendable successes. In this short discourse, the intent is to draw on UN designs in terms of its purposes and principles at sustaining global peace and security as enunciated in Chapters I, VI and VII of its Charter by examining its general intervention efforts to protect the world against international crisis, so as to critically interrogate how it performed in the Balkan crisis and Rwanda.

Organogram and Cold War Situation

Structured around six principal Organs namely; the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice, and the Secretariat, the UNs main purposes and principles in summary includes: the maintenance of international peace and security; to develop friendly relations among nations; to achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character; and, to be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations to achieve these aims. However, for much of the period between 1945 to the end of the 1980s, the UN was shunted to the background, unable to function fully in accordance with the precepts of its Charter, as a basis for meeting these purposes and principles (Armstrong, Lloyd and Redmond 2004). This situation was fostered by the prevailing Cold War of the period which made it impossible to arrive at unanimity essential for the fulfillment of the objectives of the Charter as the Super Powers squabbled and engaged in ideological rivalries around the globe (Tozzi 1996). However, if the encumbrances of the Cold

War appeared dissipated by the early 1990s with its end, and gave a glimmer of hope for better things to come, this quickly faded away as what can be described as colossal failures of the UN with regard to its security purpose actually occurred in the post Cold War years, in the form of Bosnia and Rwanda. In this light, an apt question to ask is how did the UN fare in its peace and security purpose in the Balkans and Rwanda between 1991 and 1994? This is the overarching question of this study.

Post Cold War Challenges

The decade following the end of the cold war witnessed considerable turbulence around the world. There was 'volatility and strife in the former Soviet bloc; ethnic and religious turmoil; humanitarian disasters and emergencies in developing countries where civil disorder was out of control and security severely lacking; and more wars and open conflicts than at any time in the preceding half-century, as the rigid certainties of super power rivalries gave way' (Armstrong, Lloyd and Redmond 2004: 82). These scenarios seriously tested, and stretched the framework, capability and resources of the UN to its limits. Indeed the UNs well publicized failures in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Somalia, have had a lasting damage on its reputation and credibility, and exposed its organizational inefficiencies which culminated in the words of (Malone and Thakur 2001) 'in tragedies of avoidable errors'.

The Balkan Wars were provoked by the collapse of the Yugoslav Federation in 1991. The rump remains of that republic could not forge any central cohesion as the separate ethnic nationalisms of the various component units drifted towards self rule. Waged in the name of competing sovereignties, the Balkan wars, violently pitched fellow citizens against one another in a struggle for power and domination. In late June 1991, Serbian controlled Yugoslav Army troops invaded the newly declared Slovenian Republic signaling the disintegration of the Yugoslav Republic. Consequently, Slobodan Milosevic blatantly manipulated Serbian nationalism in order to secure a hold on power, in the process willing to resort to blood and iron to carve out a greater Serbia from the collapsing Yugoslav state (Nation 2003). By the time the destructive hostilities of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) reached Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo between 1992 and 1999, and later to Macedonia in 2000 to 2001, the conflagrations had claimed over 200,000 lives, the disappearance of numerous Croatian, Serbian and Muslim villages, reduced cities like Vukovar to rubble, throwing up millions of refugees, and generally giving rise to atrocities unseen in Europe since World War II, leaving behind a terrible legacy of physical ruin and psychological devastation (Ramet 1993, Nation 2003) .

The high points of the Balkan Wars were the Serb inspired systemic ethnic cleansings fuelled by hate propaganda which led to recurrent massacres and widespread cultural vandalism, with the apogee being the events of July 11 and 25 1995 when Bosnian –Serb forces seized the UN safe areas of Srebrenica and Zepa. In the former, they pushed aside a small force of 429 Dutch UN peacekeepers and massacred over 8,000 Muslims in what became known as the worst single atrocity of the entire Balkan war.

As the Balkan Wars unfolded and became a blot in the peace and security mandate of the UN, the carnage pressured calls for international military intervention. It must be noted that for the most part before the genocide, diplomatic efforts aimed at stemming the crisis were premised on the belief that the parties would come to a round table and negotiate in good faith. However, according to Ramet (1993) failure of more than a dozen ceasefires showed how wrong that assumption was. Significantly, the UNs feeble response in the form of countless resolutions, embargoes, and ill-mandated and ill-prepared peacekeepers who were sent in to keep peace where there was no peace to keep indicates that traditional UN peacekeeping proved inadequate to the demands of the conflict. In this instance, it was expected that enforcement measures as provided for in Chapter Seven, (Article 42) would have been used where preventive ones had failed, but unfortunately, this was not considered even when clearly civilian lives were at risk. Also, the Balkan episode showed a great lack of will to act decisively on the part of the international community. Indeed, we are informed that America's belated involvement was in many ways a product of residual Cold War dynamics (Nation 2003). Tony Blair's 1999 Chicago Economic Club Speech on Kosovo, in which he called for early and decisive international action, in matters of conflicts and killings is a further attestation to this fact.

The killings and human sufferings in the Balkans were no more or less atrocious and lamentable than other parallel conflicts of significant proportions that occurred elsewhere. According to Marrack Goulding (1999), a once long serving UN Under-Secretary-General, in 14 of the 25 conflicts that faced Africa in the years following the end of the cold war, the UN played a peacemaker and peacekeeper role, working with the OAU and other sub-regional bodies in Liberia and Sierra Leone. But in all these, the conflagration in Rwanda proved more daunting and testing for the UN. Here, the UN force (UNAMIR) sent in to help the warring parties implement the Arusha Agreement which provided for a ceasefire could not come to the aid of civilians when genocide began in April 1994, because two of the three main contingents were withdrawn by their governments and the force lacked appropriate mandate and capacity to stop the killings (Doyle and Sambanis 2006). Months were to pass before the UN Security Council could extend a

new mandate and get the necessary troops, but by then, the harm of about 800,000 dead Rwandans had been done already (Jones 2007).

It is instructive to note that as in the Balkans and Rwanda, the UN also failed in it missions in Somalia between 1992 and 1995. It's UNOSOM I and II Missions made very little impact in bringing peace to this country and had to be withdrawn without achieving many of its objectives, key amongst which were to disarm the warring parties and safeguard the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Consequently, this failure of the UN left Somalia rudderless and it remained as the epitome of a failed state, essentially without a central government for a long time, with the attendant sufferings of its people who were caught in its complex and ever-changing civil war (Armstrong, Lloyd and Redmond 2004).

Assessment

Though UN activities were not confined to only these three case studies examined above within the period under review, they represent the most glaring cases of UN failure in its onerous task of maintaining peace and bringing security to troubled spots. Its failures and successes in Cambodia, Sierra Leone, East Timor, Congo, and Iraq (2002-03) have been noted in the academic literature out there. However, with regard to the Balkans, Rwanda and Somalia, Goulding (1999) says UN peacekeeping is perceived to have failed because its forces could not succeed in preventing extreme violations of humanitarian rights and protect international humanitarian relief operations. In the same vein, Nation (2003) informs that in these cases UN initiatives did not provide effective tools for shaping the conflict environment. Instead, a lack of consensus bordering on priorities, limited mandates, purpose and style of such an intervention, and aversion to risk led to mission failures. A case in point is the instance of when only 7,000 of the 34,000 peacekeepers pledged to defend the safe areas in the Balkan Wars arrived, and even though UNPROFOR forces grew from 1500 in 1992 to over 23,000 by 1995, they were grossly insufficient to the task at hand, and the mission was characterized with an ever changing mandate (Economides and Taylor 2007).

The UNs functional failures were also as a result of actions of its member states and its political and military personnel bordering on policy, as well as managerial and operational errors. For instance, it is on record that leading UN member states resisted deployment of peacekeeping forces into the Congo in 1999 until a peace accord was reached between the warring parties. As a consequence, many civilians died in the interim as a comprehensive peace agreement proved elusive (Greig and Diehl 2005). Again, when the Liberian crises began in 1990, leading African members of the UN impressed upon the then Secretary-General, Javier Perez de Cuellar,

to do something and his reply was said to have been that 'there was nothing he could do', that as Secretary-General he was not authorized to intervene in domestic matters (Goulding 1999). In Bosnia, there are accounts of atrocities of brutal and systemic rapes, torture and killings with several women claiming they had been raped by UN soldiers as a condition for escape from Serbian-run rape/death camps (Peck 1995). The UNAMSIL force in Sierra Leone was not spared of its own problems, as it nearly imploded under fire due to not only poor planning, and other logistical issues, but was seriously undermined by the deputy force commander who reportedly refused to take direct orders from his commander.

In the face of recurring problems in its peacekeeping missions, the UN inaugurated in 1999 a self assessment process, the findings of which indicted it in the events leading to the genocide in Srebrenica. Similarly, another of its panels chaired by former Swedish Prime Minister Ingmar Carlsson presented a damning report on the UNs failure to prevent the genocide of half a million Rwandans in 1994 (Malone and Thakur 2001, also see UN Reports on Srebrenica and Rwanda). In addition, in a bid to forestall genocide and other mass atrocity crimes in future, the UN initiated in 2005 the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine (R2P) [3]. Adopted under UNSC Resolution 1674 of April 2006, it was designed with the notion that sovereignty is not a right, but a responsibility; hence, states and leaders cannot hide under sovereignty to commit mass crimes without incurring the wrath and response of the international community. R2P was applied in Libya under UN Security Council Resolution 1973 of 17 March 2011, where the UN, influenced by its institutional failures in the Balkans and Rwanda, did not rely on its blue helmets, but rather, collaborated with the European Union, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to prosecute and enforce its UNSC no fly zone resolution in that country.

Successes
Though the primary focus of this paper is on security, it is important to touch on, even if lightly on other aspect where the UN recorded some measures of achievement considering the broad range of its activities. In this light, it has not been a completely negative picture for the UN. Within the period under review, the UN also employed its sprawling programmes, funds and agencies to address other issues, especially missions involving significant nation-building activities in addition to the traditional truce observation role of peacekeeping. It is recorded that the UNs international peace building efforts aiming to prevent violence from recurring in states just coming out of civil wars achieved the aim of enthroning stability in such states as Cambodia, El Salvador, Mozambique, Haiti, and East Timor (Paris 2002, Lipson 2007). In these instances, the UN helped to prepare for, to

oversee, or to administer electoral and humanitarian activities. Indeed in Mozambique, the UN played a significant role in the run up to the national elections of October 1994. Here, the UN involved itself in the design and implementation of electoral laws, as well as monitoring human rights, and civil liberties, including freedom of the press and association (Paris 2002). It performed a similar role in El Salvador, after mediating an end to the civil war in 1991, and helped to usher in a new government through elections in 1994. Its emergency humanitarian relief activities in Haiti and Sudan are also highly commendable. In all of its humanitarian operations, the cost to the UN in terms of personnel involved and resources amounted to by 1994 about 77, 783 blue helmets, with an annual cost of $3.6 billion (Lipson 2007). Also, one area where the UN has done significantly well in post Cold War years is in the peaceful settlement of international disputes between states through adjudication. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has recorded an impressive compliance to its judgments by states on matters which would have possibly degenerated to conflict situations. This conforms with the UNs belief in the principles of global justice and international law as vehicles for resolving issues which might lead to a breach of the peace.

Conclusion

Since the Balkan Wars the UN and humanity failed woefully systematically in Srebrenica, Rwanda, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Darfur, and Cambodia to contain bloody and costly wars among ethnic groups that mostly deteriorated to proportions that have not been seen since the holocaust of World War II. These cases are rightly seen as the lowest points in the UNs post-Cold War peace and security efforts, mainly because of the wanton and callous loss of human lives, and destruction of properties, a situation that has not been seen since the Second World War. Indeed, most of the blame is located in the attitude of UN member states towards these upheavals, as well as the organization itself and its secretariat, who collectively when faced with the worst humanitarian catastrophes of the post-Cold War era shirked their responsibilities by doing nothing or little until much too late. Even though, the UN scored some successes in its humanitarian efforts through its other specialized agencies over time, the failure to act swiftly and stop genocide in the Balkans and Rwanda has remained a dark spot in its post-Cold War history, it is one in which it did not come out unscathed, and which characterized the UN as a bystander to mass killings.

Notes

1. Samantha Power used the term "Bystanders to Genocide" in 2001 to illustrate how the United States let the Rwandan tragedy happen. For details, see _The Atlantic Monthly_ of September 2001.
2. The Preamble of the United Nations Charter, www.un.org/en/documents/charter/preamble.shtml.
3. At the UN World Summit in September 2005, all member states formally accepted the R2P Doctrine. See www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/about/bgresponsibility.shtml.

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