

GROWING *Together*

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ROMEO DALLAIRE: PROPHET FROM UGANDA

Canadian General Romeo Dallaire was at a party when he got the phone call. He was to be Force Commander of the UN peace-keeping operation in Rwanda (UNAMIR). The Arusha Accords, which ended their recent civil war, called for a 22 month process to take the country from raw ceasefire to full democratic elections. They wanted UNAMIR operational within 5 weeks.

Dallaire fell in love with Rwanda at once. He became passionately committed to the tiny nation, but the UN's commitment to Rwanda was half-hearted at best. Rwanda had no resources and was of no strategic interest to the great powers that dominated the UN. Almost everyone agreed that something should be done, but no one wanted to do it. Troop numbers, supplies and funding were desperately short from the outset. Dallaire and his staff ended up buying basic necessities from their own pay. While they hustled to make the Arusha deadlines, the UN bureaucrats and politicians moved with Byzantine slowness.

Fuelled by delay, relations between the (mostly Tutsi) Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) and the (Hutu) Rwandese Government Forces (RGF) were deteriorating. Dallaire knew trouble was brewing which his lightly armed force, with its strict rules to fire only in self-defence, could not stem. He pleaded with the UN to send the troops and supplies to do the job, but none came.

Soon Dallaire was a peace-keeper with no peace to keep. On April 6, 1994, RGF-backed President Habyarimana was assassinated. It seems he was murdered by extremists from his own side, but at the time the crime was blamed on UNAMIR's allegedly pro-Tutsi Belgians. The Presidential Guard went on the rampage, joined by extremist Hutu militias, urged on by the hate propaganda of a popular radio station. The genocide which would destroy 800,000 lives had begun.



Through the mounting horror, Dallaire conducted endless, often humiliating, negotiations with all parties, trying to stop the killings and renew the ceasefire. He described one bizarrely cheerful meeting with a youth militia that led the slaughter as 'shaking hands with the devil'.

UNAMIR's headquarters and protected sites soon became 'home' to some 30,000 desperate people. The thinly spread troops defended them by sheer bravado. There was little food, less water and no medicine left. Dallaire and his staff, half-starved, filthy and sleep-deprived, cared for the refugees and daily risked their lives running roadblocks to rescue survivors.

As UNAMIR casualties mounted, some contributing nations ordered their troops home. Dallaire was pressured to end the mission. He refused. His diminished force, mostly Ghanaians and Tunisians, along with a few Canadians, carried on.

Dallaire turned to the international media, and slowly the world began to respond. As the genocide subsided and reinforcements arrived, the toll on Dallaire's health began to show, and he regretfully asked to be relieved of his command.

Against all odds, Dallaire saved more than 20,000 lives. What kept him at his post in such desperate circumstances? He said that his values were shaped by his devout Catholic upbringing. He refused to believe the lie that some human lives were worth more than others. The UNAMIR working day began and ended with prayers, often under shell-fire. Dallaire took many risks and occasionally defied orders to do the right thing. A padre later asked him how, after Rwanda, he could still believe in God. Dallaire answered that he knew there was a God because in Rwanda he had shaken hands with the devil. "I have seen him. I have smelled him and I have touched him. I know the devil exists, and therefore I know there is a God."

Dallaire's Rwandan memoir ends with a prophetic warning. The rage of the young in the Third World, fuelled by poverty, violence and injustice, must not be ignored. It is mobilizing. If the world does not address these root causes, there are more Rwandas on the way – and not just for Africa.



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