Learning from Rwanda

By STEVEN METZ *and* JAMES KIEVIT

Rwandan refugee camp at Kitali.

Combat Camera Imagery (Val Gempis)

While many Americans may be numbed by the violence and human suffering that plagues Sub-Saharan Africa, the horror of Rwanda was so acute that it moved all save the most hardened observers. Moreover, coming on the heels of the debacle in Somalia, Rwanda raised the prospect of a mounting series of events across Africa which might require U.S. or multinational responses. In addition to easing the plight of the Rwandan people, we must draw strategic lessons from this crisis in order to mitigate the impact of similar disasters in the future.

Several lessons are clear. Efficient and effective responses to African disasters must escape the clumsiness of past U.S. policies and be based on an understanding of the historic, economic, social, and political context of each event. Moreover, an assessment of the proper response must be placed in the wider framework of an emerging post-Cold War national security strategy. What happens in Africa will affect the image, credibility, and moral standing of the United States around the world. It will also influence public attitudes on the appropriate extent of our involvement in the Third World. The level of global attention that Rwanda received makes this event a critical albeit unintended factor in determining American policy toward the Third World. If the United States is incapable of responding to disasters in Africa, isolationism will be strengthened. We can rebound from one Somalia but probably not from two. The symbolism of Rwanda in strategic terms may outweigh its immediate significance. By examining this situation, we may develop the insights and means to make maximum use of scarce resources when the next African disaster explodes.

Rwanda will not be the last disaster to require military intervention. Many African states have the requisite mix of primal conflict, political elites, and fragile institutions that frustrate efforts to seek nonviolent solutions to their problems. They are buffeted by economic disintegration or stagnation, population strains, ecological decay, and regional conflict. And with the capabilities of the United States, United Nations, and nongovernmental organizations to respond to disasters on the rise as the situation in Sub-Saharan Africa gets worse, life in refugee camps will become more attractive to the beleaguered peoples of Africa. It is an irony that demand grows in proportion to competence. The Nation will soon find that this holds for disaster relief: the better we become, the more we will be asked to do.

Rejecting calls for help can be unethical or politically infeasible. Americans want quick and effective response to disasters. Only the Armed Forces have the training, assets, and experience to respond rapidly to such events when public order and services collapse. Moreover, our military can make a major contribution to a multinational approach to controlling disaster. Whether because of political or resource constraints, African states are unable to react to large-scale disasters without outside aid. This means that the Armed Forces—together with international bodies like the United Nations, nongovernmental organizations, and other states—will remain involved in African relief efforts. Our competency must stay one step ahead of rising demands.

When the United States takes part in relief operations in Sub-Saharan Africa, its objectives must be limited. We do not have pressing geostrategic or tangible interests at stake. Our concerns are moral and

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symbolic. The limitations on our interests should fashion our goals: when we get involved the immediate objective is to ameliorate the catastrophe and meet basic human needs. Our long-term objective is to create or reestablish minimum standards of human rights. This problem may occur under national authorities or international organizations. Those who argue that such an approach leaves the root causes of disasters untouched and that the ultimate solution is establishing viable democracies or economies are correct but naive. The limits of our interests and extent of our global commitments simply will not permit sustained, expensive engagement in Africa. Memories of Somalia are still fresh. We will support long-term solutions but seldom if ever assume sole responsibility. The key to increased efficiency and effectiveness in disaster intervention lies in the process of establishing and refining concepts and procedures to deal with it.

When to Intervene

No decision is harder yet more critical than the timing of an intervention. Many analysts take an early-is-better approach. To limit suffering, they argue, one must preempt disaster. If that is not viable, intervene as early as possible.[1] According to the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, the 1994 mission undertaken in East Africa to organize international support for preventing a drought from triggering famine probably saved more lives than parallel efforts in Rwanda.[2] Similarly, the DOD relief coordinator has stated: "The most important thing for all of us is to get better at creating an early-warning system, not just for famines but [for] man-made regional conflicts."[3]

While the early-is-better approach sounds rational, it underestimates the severe constraints placed on U.S. policymakers and strategists. We did not, after all, delay involvement in Rwanda because of amorality or incompetence. Absent a clear, unmitigated disaster, it is often difficult to generate a consensus among the public and in Congress for anything more than diplomatic action. However much they were moved by the tragedy, few Americans supported putting our troops in harm's way when Rwandans themselves appeared unwilling to stop the killing. Furthermore, the notion of a conflict being ripe for resolution is relevant when contemplating intervention.[4] As morally painful as it may be, there are conflicts in which hate and violence must subside before any settlement can be reached. Just as the horrors of World War II made the conflict in Europe open to a resolution, the bloodbath in Rwanda may set the stage for an ultimate settlement to that nation's problems. If the United States or some multinational force had stopped the conflict before one side triumphed, a reservoir of ethnic hatred might have continued to simmer only to boil over again.

The distinction between controlled and uncontrolled disasters also suggests a real strategic dilemma. Controlled disasters should be easier to resolve because they are normally engineered by regimes and are more limited in scope. This implies that if the United States is unwilling to stop or prevent disasters, the next best solution may be assuring control over them, even if this results in maintaining the status quo. This is an inescapable dilemma of security policy. Some argue that it is best to retain influence over repressive regimes in order to ultimately change their conduct. This, for instance, was the basis of the Reagan administration's policy on constructive engagement with regard to the minority government of South Africa. While that argument had some validity during the Cold War when global geostrategic interests overrode other issues, it makes little sense today. A regime that orchestrates a human disaster, even if controlled, is beyond the moral pale. The risk of unleashing larger disasters must be taken to change the conduct of repressive regimes.

U.S. policy will generally be apparent when a disaster is either controlled or uncontrolled. If it is controlled we should pressure the regime engineering that disaster directly or by mobilizing international support. If the regime alters its policy we should support multinational relief efforts. If a regime does not respond, America can attempt to build a coalition for coercive intervention and relief or even contribute military forces, but in peripheral areas the Nation will not act alone. For clearly uncontrolled disasters, relief must come first and political efforts to pass control to civilian authorities second. The major problem, however, will come when disasters cannot be classified as controlled or uncontrolled. As always, gray areas are very complex. When they appear, we must decide on a case-by-case basis whether political pressure or immediate relief should take priority.

Decisions to intervene are not made in a vacuum. Intervention in Somalia must be viewed in a broader framework of attempts to create a new world order; intervening in Rwanda may have been directly related to American frustration over Haiti at the time. In a perfect world transitory public opinion would not determine policy, but in peripheral regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, with no tangible national interests at stake, it is opinion that will primarily determine policy.

Multi-Dimensional Conflict

When Americans try to grapple with African conflicts, they often overemphasize the primal dimension. Tribes, clans, and elites are relevant but are not the only determinants of conflict and often not even the most important. In African conflicts primalism often begins as a secondary consideration and only grows as it is manipulated in a power struggle. Since this also occurred in the Southern part of the United States in the 1950s and 1960s when some politicians fanned the flames of racial hatred to advance their careers, Americans should understand it. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the tendency to manipulate tribal, ethnic, and other differences for personal power is even more pronounced precisely because the politi-

cal stakes are so high. Winners not only gain power to govern but also wrest control over a country's economy and patronage associated with jobs, contracts, and national treasure. Defeat often means losing everything. This makes competitors in the political arena willing to stoop to anything, even patent manipulation of tribal or ethnic distrust.

Regional factors are equally critical. Disasters are shaped, sometimes caused, by what goes on beyond national frontiers. Conflict in neighboring states, for instance, often creates refugees. When political boundaries bear little resemblance to ethnic or tribal dividing lines and violence is endemic, refugees become a permanent fact of life. Thus few conflicts are strictly internal. Events in Rwanda were affected by violent repression in Burundi and Uganda that led to a refugee exodus which altered migrant communities. Furthermore, conflicts in neighboring states sometimes breed antagonisms that generate external support for rebel and insurgent groups.[5]

Rwanda also demonstrated the significance of personalities in the politics of Sub-Saharan Africa. Americans, accustomed to perceiving things in terms of institutions, parties, movements, et al., can overlook this dimension. But politics in Africa are often characterized by "a personal or factional struggle to control the national government or to influence it, a contest restrained by private and tacit agreements, prudential concerns, and personal ties and dependencies rather than public rules and institutions."[6] Thus policymakers and strategists should frame their approach with due regard for key personalities rather than using oversimplified notions of tribal conflict.

Finally, in cases where limited national interests are at risk, the United States is unlikely to preempt a conflict or intervene to stop a war. Rwanda suggests that we will intervene when there is a natural disaster but not in order to halt violence. There is no consensus among Americans to support armed intervention in internal conflicts. The public can tolerate violence in peripheral areas (or at least considers the cost of stopping it too great). We have grown accustomed to human evil. But the public will not abide human suffering from natural or preventable causes. Preemption may be realistic in regions of strategic importance but not in areas like Sub-Saharan Africa. In sum, we appear doomed to react to disasters rather than prevent them.

Operational Considerations

Given limited national interests in Africa, the impact of our actions on wider perceptions is central. This implies that the ultimate success of an operation will be determined as much by how America and the world community perceive it as by what unfolds on the ground. Somalia serves to illustrate this phenomenon. In ameliorating suffering and staving off a mass disaster, the effort by the United States was a success, although it is often portrayed as a failure. Similarly, the limits of our interests in Africa mean there will be little support for sustained, expensive operations. This makes a quick hand-off to civilians all the more vital.

Coherent military planning depends upon a clear notion of the desired outcome. This is surely true of military participation in disaster relief. Most often success will be defined in terms of bringing a disaster under control and passing responsibility for relief operations over to civilians, either under multinational or national auspices. Determining indicators of unresolvability is more difficult. Once forces are in place, there is a possibility of succumbing to mission creep. Disasters involve a multitude of tasks, some directly connected to relief operations and

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others subsidiary. The desire of the Armed Forces to be efficient and effective leads to assuming responsibility for tasks rather than leaving them undone or in what may be seen as incompetent hands. Establishing security is especially tempting. Disasters are disorderly by their nature. Armed men abound, be they regular soldiers, militiamen, or simple thugs. In fact, these categories are often blurred in Sub-Saharan Africa. But when security degenerates, operations become peace enforcement rather than disaster relief. At that point, the rules change.

Americans convoying water during Support Hope.

Combat Camera Imagery (Marv Krause)

In peripheral areas like Sub-Saharan Africa, it is vital for the U.S. military to avoid mission creep and for policymakers to accept the intractability of some situations and resist urges to assume responsibility for peace enforcement. We should not automatically eschew involvement in peace enforcement in areas where national interests are minimal, but we should limit our contributions to air transport, logistical support, and intelligence. Finally, determining how to hand relief activities over to civil authorities is a vital strategic decision that must be worked out early.

Because time is so precious in responding to disasters, the proper chain of command will probably only be clarified as each operation progresses. It would be immoral and politically inept to argue over lines of authority as innocent people die. Force mixture requires somewhat greater attention. The less developed the infrastructure in a disaster area, and the less stable a region, the greater our military role. This is especially true when relief operations are subjected to threats of violence. As a rule of thumb, civil agencies should exercise the maximum degree of responsibility possible for disaster relief. This will minimize the diversion of military resources and reflects the fact that civilian organizations are better equipped to sustain the efforts needed to bring a disaster-ridden area to some semblance of normalcy. Within the U.S. military, combat forces in particular should be kept to the lowest possible level. Those forces would play a major role only in coercive intervention to stop a controlled disaster. When there is little threat of violence, only combat support and combat services support forces might be involved.

Stepped-up training and exercising of JTFs for humanitarian relief should be explored even at the expense of diminished time and resources for combat training. No service should consider humanitarian relief its primary mission, but such operations will be an important secondary one for the foreseeable future. The goal should be to provide appropriate time and money to training and planning for these sorts of operations—neither too much nor too little.

Although the Marines did a superb job in Somalia, Bangladesh, et al., the Army will likely play the principal role in future African disasters. The Marine Corps is hard pressed to maintain its warfighting proficiency and, in addition, it lacks some resources that the Army has, particularly for conducting sustained operations inland and psychological operations. The likelihood of large-scale disaster relief requires a serious, zero-based approach to force structure issues. A shortfall exists in active Army combat support and combat service support units which is made up by the Reserve component in wartime. In operations other than war, such as humanitarian relief, the Army will have to either overtax strained active forces or mobilize Reserve units, a decision that has long-term implications for recruitment and retention. There is no easy solution to such issues, but they must be tackled head-on and resolved.

It would be easy for the Armed Forces to view humanitarian relief in Sub-Saharan Africa as a distraction. No doubt such operations are costly for forces hard-pressed to retain proficiency in primary warfighting skills. But three facts remain clear. First, human disasters born of conflict will continue to plague the region. Second, Americans will continue to demand engagement. And finally, only the military can respond efficiently and effectively when order collapses or authorities resist relief efforts. The more joint planners and commanders appreciate the nature of African strife and the more they prepare before conflicts occur, the greater the likelihood of fulfilling expectations with minimum cost to other efforts. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] This is the theme, for instance, of Douglas Jehl in "U.S. Policy: A Mistake?" *The New York Times*, July 31, 1994, p. E15, and Milton Leitenberg in "Anatomy of a Massacre," *The New York Times*, July 31, 1994, p. E15.

[2] J. Brian Atwood, "Suddenly, Chaos," *The Washington Post*, July 31, 1994, p. C9.

[3] Quoted in Eric Schmitt, "Military's Growing Role in Relief Missions Prompts Concerns," *The New York Times*, July 31, 1994, p. 3.

[4] For an elaboration of this subject, see I. William Zartman, *Ripe for Resolution: Conflict and Intervention in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 220–51.

[5] Earl Conteh-Morgan, "Conflict and Militarization in Africa: Past Trends and New Scenarios," *Conflict Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Winter 1993), p. 33.

[6] Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa: Prince, Autocrat, Prophet, Tyrant* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 1.