

# Rwanda 1994: A Failure of Leadership and a Preventable Genocide, by Paolo Tripodi, Marine Corps University Press, 2025

*D.P.K. Pillay\**

The author of *Rwanda 1994: A Failure of Leadership and a Preventable Genocide*, Dr Paolo Tripodi, is a professor and the ethics branch head at the Lejeune Leadership Institute, Marine Corps University. Before his academic career, he was an infantry officer with the Italian Carabinieri. Dr Tripodi has authored a book and three edited volumes, and his articles have been published in various military and academic journals. The book *Rwanda 1994: A Failure of Leadership and a Preventable Genocide* is a powerful and meticulously researched work that challenges the conventional narrative of the Rwandan genocide. Instead of focusing solely on the inaction of the international community, the author takes a tactical and operational approach, investigating whether the United Nations' mission on the ground, i.e., United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) could have stopped the genocide even with its limited resources. His conclusion is a resounding and troubling 'yes'.

The book takes a deep dive into the events leading up to and during the first weeks of the 1994 genocide. Paolo Tripodi, a former Italian

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\* Col (Dr) D.P.K. Pillay (Retd) is a Research Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), New Delhi, India.

infantry officer, brings a unique and professional military perspective to this horrific episode in history. He acknowledges the seminal works of scholars like Samantha Power and Alison Des Forges, which rightly blame the international community for its failure to intervene. However, his central thesis is that UNAMIR itself, hampered by a lack of competent leadership and a flawed mindset, missed crucial opportunities to save lives. The book is structured to provide a comprehensive historical context, starting with the origins of the Hutu-Tutsi conflict and the formation of the two military organisations that would define the civil war: the Forces Armées Rwandaises (FAR) and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Tripodi meticulously traces the roots of the conflict back to the Belgian colonial administration, which, in a shortsighted move, shifted power from the Tutsi minority to the Hutu majority, setting the stage for future ethnic and regional tensions. The formation of the RPF in Uganda by exiled Tutsis and their subsequent military training under Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army is detailed, highlighting the RPF's transformation from a refugee group to a disciplined and effective fighting force.

This historical overview is essential for understanding the political and military landscape that UNAMIR entered. The author describes how the Arusha Accords, intended to bring peace and form a transitional government, were met with opposition from Hutu extremists who feared losing power. This resistance, coupled with a series of broken ceasefires and escalating violence, painted a clear picture of a country on the brink of disaster.

### **A Tale of Two Peacekeepers**

The book's dedication sets a poignant tone by honouring two peacekeepers who represent the extreme outcomes of the mission's ethical and leadership challenges: Captain Mbaye Diagne and Major Stefan Steć. Captain Mbaye Diagne was a Senegalese military officer and unarmed UN military observer who was praised for his bravery and commitment to saving lives during the genocide. The book highlights him as a courageous and risk-taking individual who became legendary for his ability to navigate through checkpoints and rescue hundreds of civilians, often defying UNAMIR's orders and risking his own life in the process. He tragically died on 31 May 1994, from a mortar shell fragment, just days before his tour was supposed to end.

Major Stefan Steć was a Polish Army UN military observer who co-founded a humanitarian assistance cell (HAC) within UNAMIR to organise rescue teams and establish secure zones. He meticulously documented the

massacre at a Catholic church, filming the bodies and charred identity cards, and was one of the first to label what he saw as genocide. Steć believed the mission's focus should have been on humanitarian aid, but felt the UN Security Council opposed the initiative, instead favouring 'talks on impossible ceasefire' and 'playing for time'. Frustrated by the restrictions and the inability to save people, he even considered leaving UNAMIR to join the RPF in protest. The dedication acknowledges that he 'died because he could not do what was right'.

### **Incompetence and Tragic Inaction**

The heart of the book lies in its detailed examination of the UNAMIR mission's set-up and its tragic collapse. Tripodi portrays General Roméo Dallaire as a well-intentioned but an inexperienced commander, eager for his first mission but hamstrung by a UN bureaucracy that demanded a mission plan 'to fit available resources rather than to respond to the actual demands of the situation'. This led to a critical underestimation of the required troop strength, with Dallaire proposing a force of 2,500 despite knowing that 5,500 to 8,000 were needed for an 'ideal' deployment. The mission's force composition was also a major weakness, relying heavily on contingents from developing countries, many of whom were poorly trained and equipped. The Bangladeshi contingent, for example, is described as being a liability rather than an asset, with its soldiers lacking basic training and motivation. The most damning critique is reserved for the events of 7 April 1994, and the days that followed. The author argues that the failure was not due to the absence of a robust mandate, but to a 'lack of experienced and competent military leadership'. He dissects the decisions of senior UNAMIR leaders, including Dallaire and Colonel Luc Marchal, demonstrating how their mindset, shaped by a commitment to political negotiation and a fear of escalating the conflict, prevented them from taking decisive action. This passivity, he contends, sent a powerful message to the perpetrators of the genocide that the UN was reluctant to use force. The tragic story of the 10 Belgian paratroopers brutally murdered at Camp Kigali serves as a central case study. The author highlights the flawed chain of command and the poor judgement that led to their surrender and death subsequently. He contrasts this with the actions of other small UN units and individuals, such as Lieutenant Jean-Marc Vermeulen, who, by relying on their training and initiative, successfully repelled attacks and saved numerous lives. The Tunisian contingent, in particular, is lauded as a 'standout' for its effectiveness and determination despite being poorly equipped. Paolo Tripodi

also uncovers a series of critical failures in intelligence and communication. He discusses the infamous ‘genocide fax’ of January 1994, arguing that Dallaire’s unorthodox communication style and the UN’s lack of response created a ‘fracture’ in the chain of command. This fracture, combined with the general’s disconnection from the tactical situation, meant that key information, such as the massacre at the École Technique Officielle (ETO), remained unknown to the highest levels of command. The decision to abandon thousands of refugees at the ETO, leading to a large-scale massacre, is presented as a moral failure and a stark example of how the prioritisation of self-preservation over the protection of civilians had deadly consequences.

### CONCLUSION

The last few chapters of the book detail the mission’s collapse and the eventual, albeit limited, resolution. The author describes how Dallaire, facing overwhelming pressure and the humiliation of a rapidly disintegrating mission, decided to stay in Rwanda with a small, unauthorised force to provide humanitarian assistance. He concludes with a powerful reflection on leadership, character and competence. While acknowledging Dallaire’s personal bravery and moral integrity, Tripodi asserts that these qualities were not enough to overcome his ‘inexperience and incompetence’ in a high-stakes military command environment.

*Rwanda 1994: A Failure of Leadership and a Preventable Genocide* is a difficult but an essential read. It is a sober, unsparing analysis that forces readers to confront uncomfortable questions about the nature of military leadership in humanitarian crises. Tripodi’s work is not an exercise in apportioning blame but a professional exploration aimed at learning from past mistakes to prevent similar tragedies in the future. The book’s strength lies in its ability to move beyond a simplistic narrative of international apathy to a granular, tactical-level critique of military command. It is a vital resource for military professionals, scholars of genocide, and anyone seeking a deeper understanding of one of the 20th century’s most devastating events.