

### ***Following Belgian Memorial on 7-23-17***

Today we went to a memorial for the Belgian security detail that died serving Agathe Uwilingiyimana, the Rwandan Prime Minister, in the immediate aftermath of Habyarimana's assassination.

The opportunity to actually come to Rwanda and move between cities, seeing different schools, public institutions, and groups of people everywhere has justifiably and necessarily given me a Rwandan-centric view of the genocide. The intimacy and community of the violence felt insular and personal after so many days of accounts translated from Kinyarwanda. And it should.

But for all of that, genocide is inherently global, because the sheer inhumanity of it is an affront to the very idea of our species.

Only one person has asked our entire group about the world outside of Rwanda's borders in the context of genocide.

"Have you ever met a Frenchman," he asked in a panel discussion with no context whatsoever. We were just supposed to know that the question came from a place of deep anger and sadness. And we were just supposed to know why the anger and sadness were there.

We were also supposed to know that the question was really "what did the Frenchman say when you asked him why Rwandan life meant so little to them?"

To the question asker, this was unambiguous. For us, we needed to be carefully walked up to the embarrassment of never even thinking about the death of one million human beings enough to connect those dots. The memorial today reminded me of how complicated the international portions of this story were for an outsider, and how endlessly saturating they are for Rwandans.

No matter how central Rwanda is to this story, I will ultimately have to fly home. From there, I will have to make sense of a story so grim and personal for some that they can communicate decades of international policy in a six word question. And I will have to communicate it to people who know nothing of Rwanda, couldn't find it on a map, and didn't even know a genocide occurred.

When the Belgian security force was holed up with the Prime Minister, it was the Rwandan government that called for their killing. Suddenly a neutral force was firing shots to defend Rwanda against itself in a killing that served to clear the way for more killing in the future. Just as they knew they needed to control the radio station, the Genocidaires knew that they could send potential western defense of Tutsis running if they just killed a few of them as quickly as possible. Less than 24 hours after the plane went down, the death of Belgian peace keepers alongside the prime minister cleared the path for more killing.

The brief, violent chess match to drive out foreign forces found truly noble people dying and their country withdrawing to limit further casualties. And as far as European lives are concerned, they did limit them. Avoiding the loss of trained, armed, and ready-to-serve soldiers, however enabled a million more civilian deaths and the de facto death of an entire country.

Whether it happened during the genocide, afterward in the squalor of a refugee camp, or in the heart of people slowly returning home, Rwanda was dead as a functional entity.

Rwanda isn't the whole world, but genocide, for all of the carefully parcelled and delineated definitions, is inherently as global as the human population. The international dominos of action, reaction, neglect, and responsibility found no broadly categorized victors or heroes. Small groups and individuals with names that are now in bronze outside of the building they were murdered in, not countries were heroic, while nations and organizations found that shameful neutrality that further empowers the wicked.

Today brought sharply into focus how powerful the message and action of individuals becomes, especially when those artificial designations of race and nation find us living down to the worst we are capable of when we get together. In a disaster we may be fortunate enough to get the help of our neighbors, but we have shown that we cannot expect it.

To understand this trip, especially as an outsider and doubly so for anyone who hasn't been to Rwanda, it will require individuals, not groups. The stories of the people we've met need names and faces. To simply say a group or offer a statistic isn't enough. Reliance on human generalization is too much of why this happened and why it went unimpeded for as long as it did. Instead, individuals must take the responsibility to tell the stories of other individuals. Otherwise, for someone hoping to understand why this happened, the humanity of the story is lost to statistics, dates, and names too easy to forget and too hard to pronounce.

When we cannot rely on people to act with decency and compassion, we must find the bravery to be just one person who will. Peace and understanding will not be the end anywhere if it does not begin with individuals somewhere.