

Box 18: Operation Turquoise (23 June-21 August 1994)

On 22 June, after ten days of difficult negotiations between the members of the Security Council of the UN, Resolution 929 providing for the establishment of a multinational humanitarian operation in support to civilians and entitled to use force was voted. Under French command - France being the only candidate country - "Operation Turquoise" was designed to extend over a period of two months, while the UN deploys 5,500 men of UNAMIR 2, whose sending was decided on May 17 (Resolution 918). Despite France's insistence to its European and African partners, only a Senegalese contingent joined on site the 2,494 French soldiers.

From their Goma and Bukavu support positions in Zaire, the French forces entered the Rwandan territory on June 23 and gradually covered the southwest quarter of the country. On July 5, after the fall of Kigali and Butare into the hands of the RPF, they established there a "safe humanitarian zone" where hundreds of thousands of civilians took refuge, along with thousands of militiamen and soldiers accused of "planned and systematic genocide" in the June 30 report of the United Nations' Commission on human Rights. The report had also explicitly denounced the liability of foreign states who accordingly continued to materially and financially support the interim authorities. Coming from the French authorities, directly affected by these accusations, this armed humanitarian operation certainly was part of a now shared indignation reaction to massacres. It extended France's first attempts to moral "redeem" on the international opinion's side.

Challenged by the OAU and the leaders of the UNAMIR 1, denounced by the RPF, suspected of ulterior political motives by most NGOs working on site, the *Turquoise* operation quickly met on the ground almost insurmountable difficulties. It certainly managed to save a few thousand lives, and most importantly, protected Burundi from the destabilization the flood of hundreds of thousands of refugees would inevitably have triggered. But after the FAR forces grouped northwest collapsed, it did not avoid the feared "humanitarian disaster". Civilians were explicitly used to cover the retreat of the defeated government forces and then serve from refugee camps, as recruiting bases for Hutu guerrilla for a future reconquest.

Among the causes of impotence were the inability of elite troops to accomplish specifically humanitarian tasks, the latent or explicit boycott of specialized structures (NGOs and UN agencies), initially at least, and especially the disqualification of France for any military-political mediation because of the involvement of most of its troops in June 1994 in military operations alongside the FAR against the Tutsi rebellion in the previous years.

Basically, the French operation under a UN mandate was not able to overcome the improvisation of its political objectives¹ and the fear of foreign powers to engage in a high-risk area. In France, if the

¹ The will to provide a safe humanitarian zone (HSZ) in "safe territory Hutu" and negotiate in the meanwhile political arrangements that would sustain this position supposed to be able to rely on authorities whose legitimacy could not be disputed. While many of the French officers' interlocutors met this criterion, no action was initiated even only to oust those who did not meet this requirement. If the French representative in Goma didn't bow to pressure from the "Gisenyi authorities" (with which he took distance on July 6, ten days before the defeat) who insistently asked him to extend the ZHS to all "free" Northwest prefectures (that is to say, not yet occupied by the RPF). But after receiving the order to prohibit access of members of the interim

efforts seemed to have relieved the bad conscience of public opinion and obliged the reluctant government officials and staff to show solidarity with "those held responsible for the mess", informed circles were not fooled by this late "bleaching" humanitarian operation, honorable, but without result.

At the international level, despite the absence of obvious solidarity, both in Europe and Africa, France had however recovered the appearance of a "great power", "brave and voluntary" face to the "loose impotence" of its main European and international partners. In Africa, it was demonstrated that there still was in Paris an "African policy" and France was released from the "Fashoda complex".

By the end of July, once the humanitarian disaster was consumed (a cholera epidemic made a few days thousands deaths among the million exhausted and hungry refugees who had swept the province of North Kivu in Zaire) and, once again, under pressure from the media, international assistance was to be amplified and organized. The United States in particular, enjoying the favor of the new RPF authorities set in Kigali, engaged serious humanitarian and political means to defuse the risk of future explosion. The goings and opportunistic fluctuations in the international management of the Rwandan crisis had thus cruelly exposed the inability of the OAU and organizations in charge of the "new international order" to propose an intervention force or mediation alternative to imperial powers always available to protect their special interests on behalf of the international community.

government who wanted to seek refuge to the ZHS, the "Turquoise" operation has not blocked their access nor has arrested or put them under house arrest: "Such a task would be likely to get us out of our neutrality" (statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 16 July 1994 in French National Assembly, a Survey of the Rwandan tragedy, vol. I, p. 325). It wasn't either able to disarm militias or the Government armed forces, among whose "a large part (10,000 out of 30,000) entered Zaire with their weapons" (*ibid.*, p. 327).