

You cannot do much for peace if you fear to die for peace

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Yesterday I received an email asking for help/advice on getting a Kenyan out of Kenya because he was be threatened due to his possible testimony in the International Criminal Court about the 2008 post election violence. There is no doubt that Kenyans are being threatened. Two human rights workers have already been assassinated. But the request was from his friends in the United States and I saw no indication that he had asked to be rescued. Perhaps he does want this, but I would want to hear it directly from him.

This illustrates one of the major differences between Western thinking and African thinking. American thinking puts individual survival as the highest priority. African thinking, under the concept of "ubuntu" (humanness), considers the individual only in context of the larger community. Let me give you a number of examples of how this plays out.

The first occurred with a report I just received from Adrien Niyongabo about a project we are planning to do in Burundi for the upcoming Burundi elections. HROC/AGLI will train citizen reporters who have attended our HROC workshops and joined together in Democracy and Peace groups to observe and try to make the elections fair and non-violent. Since the citizen reporters will be known by the population and government authorities, there is a certain amount of risk in doing this work. But the response of the HROC committee included one member who commented, "You can not do much for peace if you fear to die for peace".

I have observed this before. A number of years ago I was at an AVP meeting in Kigali, Rwanda and Eddie Kalisa, a young Tutsi facilitator, brought up the request from Kaduha government officials for AVP workshops because in this remote hilly area, Hutu were still killing Tutsi. Among the eight or so people at the committee meeting, not one, including Eddie who would be an obvious target, expressed any comment or reservation about going to do three day workshops in this clearly dangerous place. Their work was to bring reconciliation and that was what they were dedicated to do, without any qualms or hesitancy whatsoever over safety.

Alison Des Forges, my good friend and human rights expert on Rwanda who died in a plane crash last February, once told me that before the genocide, when she was doing investigations of the massacres that were then taking place, whenever she asked a Rwandan informant if she could use his/her name, he/she always replied in the affirmative with a comment such as, "These people here have died for no reason whatsoever and, if I die because of what I have told you, then I will have at least died for a reason".

Theoneste Bagasora, the "architect" of the genocide, and the other genocedaries understood this westerners' thinking. They realized that, when they brutally killed and

mutilated the ten Belgian UN peacekeepers, all the Europeans and Americans would flee the country enabling them to do the "work" (as they called killing of Tutsi) by themselves without outside knowledge and intervention. They were absolutely right. President Bill Clinton was very concerned about getting the 254 Americans out of Rwanda, but when this was accomplished, the plight of the 500,000 plus Rwandans who were killed in the genocide was not his concern.

What is ironic is that the one American, Carl Wilkens, a Seventh Day Adventist missionary who refused to be evacuated – although he sent his wife and four children out of the country – saved more lives in the genocide than the whole American military with its hundreds of billions of dollars and awe-inspiring weaponry. When Carl saw that one of the orphanages filled with Tutsi boys whom he was working to help survive was about to be attacked by the "interahamwe" ("those who work together"), who were responsible for much of the killing during the genocide, he ran to the nearest government center and happened upon the prime minister and asked him to intercede and call off the "interahamwe" and their attack. The prime minister agreed and the boys survived. You can hear the event first hand in Frontline's 2004 documentary, "Ghosts of Rwanda". He was one who was not afraid to die for peace.

Then there is the little noted fact about the Rwandan genocide. A number of Tutsi men living in Rwanda were married to Belgian, French, or French-Canadian women. When the genocide came, those women had the choice of leaving Rwanda and their husbands and children (who are considered "Tutsi" by the rules used in Rwanda) to almost certain death or staying with their family and risk being killed as well. As far as I can tell most stayed with their families and most were also killed. But in the weird way that the world thinks of "significant people", when these "white" women married Africans they gave up the privileges of being "significant". Their deaths, like that of so many Rwandans, were little noted and not remembered.

This may all sound academic, but is a crucial issue for me. When the 2008 post election violence occurred in Kenya, Eden Grace, a Friends United Meeting's staff member living in Kisumu, offered to put me on the list of Americans to be evacuated by the US Embassy if necessary. This was not unlikely as the Americans in Kisumu – a city with a lot of violence at that time – were evacuated twice. She indicated that Gladys as my spouse, although not an American citizen, would be evacuated along with me.

I declined: for two reasons.

First I might potentially save myself and Gladys, but what about her Father, six sisters, son, daughter, two grandchildren and so many other members of her family. Could we flee leaving them to perhaps perish? While I might be in more danger by staying, there was also the possibility that Gladys and I, having more resources – contacts, money, knowledge of the way the world works – might be able to assist other family members to survive. Would we live with souls at ease if we were evacuated, but other family members were killed?

But the second reason is that if I fled I would be an accomplice to the violence. The whole concept of protecting human rights is based on the fact that an observer (and as an American I am one of those "significant people") might be a deterrent. Moreover, since I had a cell phone and internet access, might not my reporting from such an out-of-the-way place as Lumakanda, where we live, be a testimony and witness to what was going on? Might this not alert the rest of the world – at least my contacts – about the unfolding events?

"You cannot do much for peace if you fear to die for peace." My philosophy has always been, "Death, being a necessary end, will come when it will come". That doesn't come from the Bible, but from Shakespeare.