

# The Great Lakes, Adjournment Debate

Tuesday, 11 December 2001

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[Mr. McNulty.] 9.30 am Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): The issues relating to the region around the Great Lakes are incredibly important. A humanitarian catastrophe continues to unfold there, as it has for at least the past 10 years. In that region, it is difficult to draw the line between the end of one conflict and the beginning of another.

To put the debate into perspective, I shall explain some recent background. It is impossible to understand the conflict without considering the region as a whole. The present conflict in the Great Lakes began in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and dates back to 1998, since when 2.5 million people have died in it. That figure is staggering, but the fact that we rarely hear anything said about it is even more staggering. I am thus especially grateful to those hon. Members who have given their time and made the effort to be here this morning.

The war in the Congo is Africa's most complex war. It has been described as Africa's first world war and has dragged six foreign armies into the country. One of the biggest problems is the wealth of the Congo, which some people argue not only sustains but actively perpetuates the war. The recent history of the region shows the interplay between Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC. It is clear that the current conflict in the Congo stems from the wave of violence unleashed by the genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

We need to consider how British policy has changed and could perhaps change further in the future. In 1994, when the genocide in Rwanda occurred, the British ambassador to the United Nations cautioned against using the word "genocide". He rightly pointed out that if we used that word, we might be liable under our international treaty obligations to do something. As we all know, we did nothing. The international community did nothing until it was far too late.

I am still haunted by the genocide site in Rwanda that I visited with two of my colleagues from the Select Committee on International Development who are here this morning. What haunted me most was not the 5,000 or 10,000 corpses that we saw and stepped over in the school into which people had been herded and murdered over a 36-hour period, but the fact that many of the children's bodies had only one foot. Several of us could not understand why those small children had only one foot. When we asked, we were told that when the adults were escaping, the militia cut off one of each child's feet to stop them escaping. They killed the parents and then came back to finish off the children.

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The vision of that classroom full of children with only one foot writhing around on the floor has never left me. That was one of the reasons why I set up the all-party group on the Great Lakes. I am extremely grateful that more than 100 Members of Parliament have joined it.

The second thing that has always haunted me was that in those classrooms the only sign of the international community was some plastic sheeting placed over the open windows on which was printed the UN logo. When I said to someone that that looked very strange—as though all that the UN did was to put up curtains after the genocide—they said, "Yes, that is basically what happened." Is not that an allegory for our modern times? The UN is doing the window dressing.

All of us who take an interest in the region—and even all those who take no interest in it—realise, post-11 September, that window dressing in areas of disaster, conflict and genocide will eventually return to haunt us. I am not saying that the conflict and the humanitarian disaster in the Great Lakes region—however tragic and all-consuming they are—will burst into our consciousness as the attacks in New York and Washington have done. That will not happen right now, but if we do not do something about the Great Lakes in particular and Africa in general, there is no doubt that, at some point, we shall pay the price for indifference that leaves millions of people to starve or be killed. Some of them are killed in the most brutal of ways, as I described. The deaths of others are equally brutal, but not so televisual: starving to death does not trigger many peacekeeping forces. It has not done so in the past.

We hope that that might change in the future, given what is happening in Afghanistan. I very much hope that as we consider the situation in the Great Lakes region, we might see there the germs of what has happened in other parts of world, so instead of waiting for a disaster—although some might argue that one has already happened—we might try to pre-empt it.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): Is not what my hon. Friend is saying exactly the message that the Prime Minister was giving in a tremendous speech to the Labour party conference in October? He pledged not to allow a Rwanda to occur again and to heal the scars of Africa. That shows a new way forward for the Government.

Ms King: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I see consternation on the faces of some Opposition Members, but I hope that we can agree with the Prime Minister's words, wherever we are on the political spectrum. I cannot imagine that anyone could say that we would not take action if a Rwanda were to happen again and 1 million people were butchered. I know for a fact that at least three of the four Opposition Members present agree with those sentiments. Indeed, they have agreed with them.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I had not planned on intervening in the debate, because I think that everyone will agree with the hon. Lady's sentiments. Opposition Members may, however, disagree with the political slant of some of the comments. As hon. Members may recall, the Prime Minister made a rather all-encompassing conference speech that included justifying early euro

11 Dec 2001 : Column 181WH entry on the basis of the 11 September attacks. Perhaps that is why there were looks of disagreement on Opposition Members' faces.

Ms King: I am sure that I would be ruled out of order were I to outline the merits of early euro membership or link such membership to Britain's national security. Although I am certain that there is such a case, I shall leave it for another time.

I was trying to explain some of the background to the crisis in the Great Lakes region. Part of the background is elaborated in a truly startling and inspirational book, which I recommend that everyone read, entitled "King Leopold's Ghost". Although it traces the history of the Congo and the Great Lakes region back a couple of hundred years, it deals particularly with the 19th century. It is instructive to examine events in the Great Lakes region from 1870 until independence in the early 1960s.

I am not one of those black people who gets up and gives a speech on colonialism every five minutes regardless of the subject, and I think that my colleagues who know me will defend me on that point. However, I think that all the Select Committee members were truly startled by the extent to which the colonial era in that part of Africa has conditioned almost all subsequent events there. I shall give an example.

When the genocide began in Rwanda, everyone said, "These bloody Africans are hacking each other to death. It is a tribal conflict. It is what Africans do." I was astonished to discover that the Belgians had introduced a law that was essentially like apartheid in South Africa and made it illegal for Rwandans not to declare that they were either Hutu or Tutsi, thereby creating an ethnic construct. What do the terms Hutu and Tutsi mean? "Tutsi" simply means that one has cattle, and "Hutu" that one is an agricultural labourer working the land. Originally, the terms were not ethnic or tribal distinctions.

In that society, working with cattle was more highly valued than working the land. Those who had cattle had assets. Consequently, the Tutsis, who comprised only 15 per cent. of the population, became the more powerful group, and the Hutus, who comprised the majority and worked the land, became the less powerful. It is essentially a class structure, but the colonial power of the time found it useful to play one group off against the other, and so made it illegal for those Africans not to belong to one group or the other.

I asked some Rwandans whether they were Hutu or Tutsi. Although we may talk about political correctness in this country, in a country where a genocide has occurred, it is a deeply impolitic question. However, one Rwandan tried to explain to me that it was not really possible to answer the question. He said that his family were neither Hutu nor Tutsi as they neither had cattle nor worked the land. He said that their society was not that simplistic and that everyone could not be divided into a group that owned cattle or worked the land. However, he also said, "The Belgians just gave us a

11 Dec 2001 : Column 182WH stamp on our identity card and we became an ethnic group." The distinction was, literally and figuratively, a political construct. What does that mean for us today?

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way in her fascinating speech. Will she not, however, give credit to Paul Kagame, the Rwandan leader? On taking control, he ensured that both groups were included in his Government. He also ensured that there was no reference to the two different groups in official literature. Whatever his faults, he has made great strides in that direction.

Ms King: I thank my hon. Friend—;I call her that deliberately—;for that intervention and could not agree

more with those sentiments. President Kagame has lately come in for no little criticism. Although I certainly have some differences in respect of how the Rwandan Government are pursuing their legitimate desire to protect Rwanda's security, I believe that Paul Kagame is one of the leading inspirations in African politics. Although my greatest fear in making such a statement is that my words will come back to haunt me, if there was ever a man with integrity whom I trust not to make those words haunt me, it is President Kagame. The Select Committee and I have met him on several occasions; I have been impressed by his dignity, resilience and thoughtfulness.

How has the Hutu-Tutsi divide affected the continuing conflict? The current conflict, dating from 1998, was unleashed by the wave of violence that followed the genocide. People in that region of Africa, which extends from eastern Congo to Rwanda and Burundi, have been on a dreadful, hellish merry-go-round whereby waves of internally displaced people are pushed from one country to the next. Such displacement occurred even before independence in the 1960s, when the first massacres occurred and Tutsis were displaced from, for example, Rwanda. Subsequently, some of them went to the Congo and Uganda, after which they returned to their own country and themselves displaced the genocidal regime. The Banyamulenge are a group of Rwandans who have been living in the Congo for hundreds of years.

Select Committee Members who visited the Congo this summer made one fascinating discovery. In 1994, Rwandans fleeing genocide arrived in the eastern DRC and helped to push the local economy past the point of no return. The economy was desperately stretched: all the remaining cattle, for example, were sold off and people were left with no means of survival. Tutsis went from one impoverished country to another to flee genocide, with catastrophic results.

Subsequently, relations between the Rwandan and Congolese Governments have deteriorated. As many hon. Members will be aware, President Kagame was initially an ally of the elder President Kabila, who turned out to be far less reliable than had been hoped and did not measure up to expectations in the west. He grievously disappointed his Rwandan and Ugandan allies, because the activities of those who committed the genocide continued in eastern DRC. The Rwandan Government continued to face attack from those who had committed the genocide and were committed to finishing it.

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The all-party group's rather controversial view is that the Rwandan Government were justified in sending troops to the DRC when Interahamwe activity and that of the genocidaires in eastern Congo was blatantly threatening Rwandan security; it continues, on occasion, to threaten it.

Then President Kabila died, and he was followed by his son, Joseph. Although many people have said that it is far too early to tell how the younger President Kabila will turn out, in my view he represents a far better hope than we had previously. I have met him twice and have been immensely impressed with his grasp of many issues, and not just those pertaining to his own region. However, the fact remains that the views of the Rwandan and Congolese Governments are light years apart.

I fully understand Rwanda's grievance; 1 million Rwandans have been murdered, most of them Tutsi. Those who were responsible sought refuge in the DRC, whose Government are incapable of stopping, or unwilling to stop, their activity. The Rwandan Government therefore said that they would do it instead. I think that our Government would have done the same. Any Government who had the capacity would have done what the Rwandan Government did.

I also understand the DRC Government's point of view. They believe that they are being occupied by an invading force; the Rwandans and Ugandans; that has been in the DRC for more than three years. The DRC Government believe that if Rwanda wanted to neutralise the threat that exists, it could. That is debatable, but it is their view. They strongly believe that the Rwandans are using the threat as a pretext for mineral exploitation, and we have to consider the grave pillage of resources in the Congo.

Mr. Robathan: I spent more time abroad with the hon. Lady during the summer than I did with my wife. I found the trip to the Congo both fascinating and depressing.

The hon. Lady refers to the DRC Government, who are legally recognised. The Kabila Government have no more legitimacy than Onusumba in Goma or Bemba in the north-east. Does she agree that the three sides are not only equally illegitimate, but equally responsible for the pillage of the country and for its problems?

Ms King: It is true that in the Great Lakes region as a whole, particularly in the areas to which the hon. Gentleman referred, there is not the democratic accountability that we wish to see. In my view, there has been a failure of politics and politicians. I remember the president of the RCD, Mr. Onusumba, saying that the politicians had failed. We might think that we make a pig's ear of things in this country, but we rarely have to shoulder the burden that exists there. Until

the three regions have some democratic accountability, the situation will not be resolved. That is why so much hope is pinned on the inter-Congolese dialogue, which is charged with bringing some democratic accountability, however tenuous, to the region.

The DRC Government believe that Rwanda and Uganda must withdraw before peace can be achieved. That is the nub of the problem with the Lusaka peace process. It is a bit like decommissioning in Northern

11 Dec 2001 : Column 184WH Ireland. The Rwandans say that they will not leave until their security is assured and they know that the people who started the genocide will not be able to finish it. They say that the Congolese Government are aiding, abetting and even continuing to arm the Interahamwe militia. The Congolese Government say, "You have invaded our country and until you leave, there will be no peace. In the meantime, you are raping and pillaging our country."

The questions of how to deal with the Interahamwe and the UN's role in that are of great importance. The all-party group that visited the Congo felt that it would be useful if the British Government could push for an expansion of personnel and resources available to MONUC, the United Nations Organisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A reply—I hesitate to use the term "the standard reply"—would be that MONUC's mandate is to keep the warring factions apart, which it is able to do at present. However, the Lusaka agreement says that MONUC's role is to deal with the Interahamwe. It is MONUC's responsibility to track down and disarm the groups that threaten to continue destabilising the region and to pour oil on troubled waters. The contradiction between MONUC's mandate and the aspirations for it in the Lusaka agreement remains unresolved.

Let me put this in the context of an area with which we are more familiar—Kosovo. Had we decided to put the same ratio of troops to land density in the DRC as we did in Kosovo, it would have required 10 million UN peacekeepers. That would be absurd, but it is the truth. No one is asking for 10 million UN peacekeepers, not least because the harsh facts of realpolitik are that Kosovo will always receive more attention, time and resources than the Congo. That may or may not be fair, but it is a fact. We are not asking for 10 million UN peacekeepers, but for a more realistic UN force than the current proposed deployment of 5,000. Ten million is not a realistic or helpful figure, but nor is 5,000 for a country the size of western Europe.

The all-party group also believes that a credible study should be carried out into the threat posed by the armed groups, especially the Interahamwe, that operate in the DRC. We would like the UN to put an embargo on arms exports in the region and the troops to be demobilised and resettled more quickly. It is important to highlight how much the British Government have done so far on the issue of demobilisation and resettlement, which is known as DDRRR in the Great Lakes lingo. I will not hazard a guess at filling in those initials, but the process involves demobilising soldiers who will otherwise have an interest in perpetuating armed conflict if for no other reason than that they have no other way to eat and earn a living.

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): Does the hon. Lady agree that anyone interested in following this issue in detail could apply to the all-party group at the House of Commons for a copy of the useful booklet that covers the visit, which includes a glossary of the abbreviations, a map and all sorts of other useful information? A fair number of people who follow the debate will be interested in that report, and I hope that they will feel able to apply for a copy.

Ms King: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his exceptionally helpful remarks. As someone who is

11 Dec 2001 : Column 185WH allergic to acronyms, I certainly recommend appendix 5, on acronyms and names, of the all-party group's report. He guides me to the back of my own report, where I find the phrase, "disarmament, demobilisation, resettlement and reintegration", although an R remains missing—I think that it might stand for reinsertion, or something like that.

The continued activity of armed groups in the region can be linked to mineral exploitation, and it is inevitably in those groups' interests for the conflict to continue. The report sets out the alleged links between the various military groups and the region's mineral resources. As someone who has the greatest sympathy and respect for the Rwandan Government and, in particular, for individuals in that Government whom I regard as my friends, I have been disturbed by many of the reports that I have heard and many of the things that I have seen with my own eyes in the Congo.

Those activities were alleged to have happened at the behest of the Rwandan military. Unfortunately, I am not one of those people who can just pretend that I did not see or hear something happen. I did, and so did other Members of Parliament. We all have slightly different views on the matter. Some of us are more sympathetic towards the Congolese; others are more sympathetic towards the Rwandans, but we are all sympathetic towards what we perceive to be the truth. The truth of the matter is that the Congo is being raped and pillaged and that local people are not benefiting from

the resources that are being taken out of their area. That is fuelling the war that is displacing those people, causing so much misery in that area.

My plea is that the British Government should be sensitive to the feelings of the people in eastern DRC, as we have been rightly sensitive to the appalling distress in Rwanda—words genuinely escape me, because it is impossible to express what happened there. We are sensitive to those events, and we have to be sensitive to the fact that virtually all the ordinary Congolese people to whom we spoke and even the ordinary representatives of the RCD—the eastern DRC group that is linked to Rwanda—told us that Rwandan soldiers were involved in removing resources from that area and also in many very unpleasant things that are being done to the civilian population there. We heard that again and again, and I cannot pretend that it was not so, but many people are displeased with me for saying that.

As I have said before, I have immense respect for President Paul Kagame, and I genuinely believe that he would not sanction all that is being done in the name of the Rwandan army, but he would say that those things are not happening. I have had many conversations with the Rwandan ambassador to this country, for whom I also have great respect, and she has pleaded with me to consider the Rwandan point of view. For example, has any hon. Member heard of coltan?

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): Yes.

Ms King: Even if hon. Members had not heard of coltan, everyone reading the report of this debate will have pressed it close to their ear because it is needed to

11 Dec 2001 : Column 186WH make mobile phones, as well as Gameboys and Playstations. That is an astonishing glimpse of globalisation in our times. Most people would tell me that nothing links the inner reaches of the Congo to Whitechapel, for example, in my constituency, yet all those teenagers in Tower Hamlets playing on their Gameboys are linked to that region, where people are forced to mine coltan in an incredibly exploitative manner.

The local economy has been severely destabilised because coltan is a volatile commodity. A tonne of it fetched \$70 last year but it fetches only 50 cents this year. Hon. Members can imagine all that that implies. I hope that other hon. Members want to speak in this debate.

Mr. Duncan: Perhaps I can take that hint and discourage the hon. Lady. In no way do I wish to be rude, but she has taken up almost half the entire time allotted to the debate, and other hon. Members want to speak. So far, I detect no disagreement across this Chamber, but we would like a chance to make a small contribution.

Ms King: I thank the hon. Gentleman sincerely. It was whispered in my ear that I might be the only Member who wished to speak and therefore that I would have to talk at length. I should like to conclude by relaying the remarks of a 16-year-old.

Peter Bottomley: It is worth mentioning the efforts of ex-President Masire of Botswana in the inter-Congolese dialogue, so that the Minister can have time to think about them. The report shows that £43,000 has been provided and the Members of Parliament on the trip recommended doubling that figure. I am not certain whether anything less than a significant increase might be useful if those talks are to help to produce a working understanding between the groups.

Ms King: I thank the hon. Gentleman. The Government have already more than doubled the money for the facilitator, and I am sure that the Minister will outline exactly what they have done.

On the visit, I met a 16-year-old called Baraka and his story outlines the complexity of the problems involved. He told me: "I left Rwanda in 1994. My family were moderate Hutus, but they were sympathising with the Tutsis. My aunt was a Tutsi, so we hid my aunt's family. I fled to DRC with my parents, but they died after we arrived. The Red Cross registered me and I went back to Rwanda. From an orphanage in Rwanda I was taken to Gisenyi. A member of my family was there but they chased me away, because they didn't want to look after me. So after that I went back to . . . DRC. One time I was in the market selling potatoes and the military . . . came and kidnapped me, they conscripted me. They took me to their military position, but I escaped. After that I was taken back to Rwanda, but the border-guards wouldn't let me enter

because I have no family there anymore who will take me. Now I am back in DRC, but they don't want me here either. I ask you to find me a country of exile where I can live. That's all."

That is his request to us as politicians. I hope that we may be able to do something.