

A scene is indelibly imprinted in my brain, from Kibumba, eastern Zaire - now the DRC - July 1994. As far as the eye can see, a vast throng of men, women and children. Rwandans: refugees, displaced, dispossessed, victims. All of these, yes. But there is a huge contradiction, because many of these victims are also killers. Thousands among them adults and children - have killed, again and again, in the previous months, until they in turn have been forced to flee with their families. The great majority of them are poor farmers, with a few years of schooling or no education at all. Yet they killed. Why? Like most people, they probably had simple ambitions - a plot of land, enough money to get by on, good health for their families, a decent education for their children, an occasional drink with their friends. So how did they end up in Kibumba and other camps like it? I believe they were there because of two things above all - poor leadership and the pervasive climate of impunity.

They were there because of destructive and disastrous national and community leadership, that, for decades, chose to divide and blame, manipulate and foster violence, rather than seek constructive and inclusive solutions to Rwanda's complex problems. No rule of law brought them to task.

And they were there because their leaders were totally unaccountable for their actions and acts of violence - they acted with complete impunity. External aid fostered an increasingly dictatorial and exclusive system in the 1980s - donors knew it, but turned a blind eye. Who wanted to shatter Rwanda's anointed role as a model of development? And, as we all know, there were plenty of warning signs of impending disaster in 1993 and 1994, but the world chose to ignore and deny these. So, there was a failure of leadership nationally and internationally, encouraging national leaders to believe that they were accountable to no-one.

Assuring a credible outcome

So how can this ministerial conference convince the rest of the world that it will make history, rather than repeat it? How can we ensure that its outcome will not be forgotten as one in a long litany of declarations and plans which are never acted upon, but that it will be remembered as the ground-breaking conference which actually led to concrete action and implementation of commitments made?

Four suggestions to get the ball rolling:

- Apply existing national and international standards.
- Take steps to ensure accountability and address impunity.
- Concretely commit to actions which will prevent and pre-empt armed conflict.
- Guarantee children as zones of peace.

1. Application of standards

To whom are the proposed Declaration and Plan of Action addressed if not to ourselves? This gathering has the experience and capacity to come up with a very clear and concrete timetable for applying at the national level the solid body of international norms and standards that now exist. In addition to long-established humanitarian and human rights laws and conventions, recent years, with Canada in the lead -