

In light of the warnings coming from its rapporteurs, the Commission clearly failed to take appropriate early action on Rwanda. The two recommendations above are only two of the many which were directed to the Commission by the international human rights community. Space and time precludes a larger reflection by this report on what is needed and what is possible in reforming and improving the Commission.

A month after April 6th, the Commission tried to catch up with events and play some constructive role.

UNCHR special session

The members of the Commission on Human Rights under its relatively new procedure⁷, responded favourably to the formal request of Canada on May 9th [initially suggested by the HCHR on May 4th] for a special meeting on Rwanda. They met the 24-25th of May, and apart from condemning the violations, appointed a Special Rapporteur mandated to report back within 4 weeks.

The session sent an important albeit belated message from the world's nations. That message was somewhat blunted through the low profile of African nations during the Commission's debate, and the qualified references to genocide. The 7 week delay from April 6 to May 24th raises questions about the need for a shorter response time⁸. Realistically, considering the mechanics of calling the Commission together, it will never provide rapid reaction as 'rapid' should be measured in days not weeks or months. Rather it is the task of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Centre to respond without delay. They did not.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Human Rights Centre

Prior to the creation of the office of High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Centre for Human Rights for did not have the mandate to carry out its own investigations per se. This has now changed although the HCHR was slow to take action in the Rwandan context. It is felt that the HCHR was relatively new to the job and this very partly explains the slowness. It is felt by some that he has learned that lesson and will react much faster next time, but only time will tell. The personality of the High Commissioner and senior staff at the Centre will determine whether they push forward the limits of promoting and protecting human rights within the UN.

⁷ ECOSOC Res. 1990/48 25 May 1990 authorized the Commission for Human Rights with the consent of the majority of its members, to convene special meetings of the Commission. The first two special meetings, 13/14 August 1992 and 30 Nov-1 Dec 1992, focussed on massacres in the ex-Yugoslavia.

⁸ This raises the issue of having a permanent commission or some other permanent human rights committee that could carry out such functions as the supervision of the treaty bodies, etc.