

Although the international community knew the situation in Rwanda was critical, the best strategy was thought to be to continue pressing for the broadest political participation in the Accords. Unfortunately, the signals that extremists were preparing to take over the government and mount large scale war on their opponents were totally missed. In effect, the signal was not distinguished from amongst the noise, in view of the widespread disinformation, the accrued tolerance to political violence and the preoccupation with competing crises. No one was prepared to consider the imminence of evil, and no one could think the unthinkable: that anybody could or would construct such a death machine, or that people actually thought they could gain power through genocide.

Then the war began and chaos broke out, and still, the international community was concerned about Burundi, still smoldering from the fires lit during the crisis the previous October. There was little information on the situation outside Kigali. Only weeks later did reports of the genocide began to filter out, when survivors came to tell about it and when no Tutsi had made it to the refugee camps. By then, the international community had lost the precious window of opportunity for strong military intervention.

In sum, what lessons can be drawn from Rwanda, in terms of key indicators for early warning? Monitoring human rights, particularly the rise of death squads, disappearances and systematic harassment of the opposition, is of critical importance. The rise in poisonous political rhetoric must also be closely watched. A general atmosphere of insecurity, associated with banditry and the spread of weapons, is also a powerful warning signal. Finally, the polarizing of key institutions of civil society, as happened with the Roman Catholic Church and human rights organizations in Rwanda, is also a sign of danger.

Discussant

Professor Howard Adelman, York University, co-author of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, began by emphasizing the differences between humanitarian early warning and political early warning. The former was initiated in the late 1980s and had nothing to do with prevention and mitigation; instead, its focus was on relief. Today, however, humanitarian early warning is used as a euphemism for political early warning, since it is also referred to in a mitigation and prevention context. The politics become very important.

In general, the earlier the early warning signal is received, the less attention anybody pays to it and the less is likely to be done. This is due to three issues: unless the crisis confronts us immediately, there may be too much competing noise; there is not likely to be conclusive evidence; and, there are likely to be many factors arguing against any response.

Prof. Adelman recalled that Ambassador Oakley had referred to the issue of personnel, including the lack of continuity and institutional memory among relief staff and the