

An Ambassador's Reflections on a Bloodbath

Thomas Patrick Melady

From 1900 to the present, fighting between the Hutu and Tutsi tribesmen of Burundi and Rwanda has taken literally countless lives, some estimates being as high as 250,000. The author, now Professor of Afro-Asian Studies at Seton Hall University, was U.S. Ambassador to Burundi from 1969 to May, 1972. Dr. Melady's book, Burundi: Sadness in the Foothills, is scheduled for early publication by Orbis.

There was so much suffering and so many people were killed in Burundi that all of us must ask the question who, if anyone, was to blame? What were the causes? Perhaps somehow we can find a way to prevent recurrences in Burundi and elsewhere. One can identify some men who obviously played a role in ordering executions and/or eliminating people for reasons of personal vengeance. The real villains, however, were not a few individuals but the type of alienation existing in the Burundi nation. This alienation—caused primarily by hate and fear—has triggered from time to time massive violence by neighbor against neighbor in both Rwanda and Burundi. Like a disease, it can recede and then break out again, resulting in further bloodbaths in Burundi.

For almost four centuries Tutsis and Hutus have lived together in mutual fear. The Tutsis, constituting about 15 per cent of the population in both Burundi and Rwanda, had been dominant for almost four hundred years in a role similar to that played by landowning aristocrats in medieval Europe. Like the medieval aristocrats of Europe, they were not inclined to give up their privileged position.

The fear of losing power was compounded by

another, the fear of elimination. The Tutsi community fears that, if it loses its dominant role in Burundi, total elimination will follow. Reprisals by the Hutu majority in Rwanda have reinforced this fear. Until the "either/or" mentality of dominating or being eliminated is overcome, it is doubtful the Tutsi will cooperate in trying to resolve the conflicts that have brought such tragedy to their world.

Some analysts have cited Rwanda and Burundi as examples of the difference between African blacks and the rest of the world, Africans being more prone to violence. This ridiculous allegation should require no refutation, but it is nonetheless useful to look at some other recent eruptions of violence in the world, asking whether there are not similar root causes to those in Burundi. Where hate and fear have been around for a long time and become deeply rooted, people have frequently resorted to violence to solve social and political problems. Killing is justified because people see no other solution. When the use of violence is justified in societies troubled by long-simmering communal hates, the horror of a bloodbath draws very near.

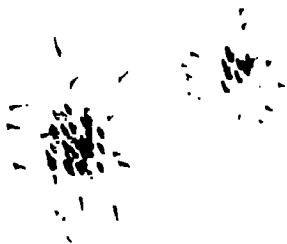
The readiness to use violence is the cause of both the Rwanda and Burundi tragedies. Hutu and Tutsi

communities have suffered from irresponsible militant leaders who have urged the use of violence. Their recklessness has solved no problems; it has produced more suffering and deepened the hate that makes another bloodbath more likely.

Among the more brutal bloodbaths of this century was the Turkish genocide against the Armenians. Between 1915 and 1917 over 800,000 Armenians died as the Turkish army engaged in a wholesale slaughter of helpless Armenian men, women and children. Whole villages were eliminated—in one case, according to a British observer, by the simple expedient of herding the villagers to the nearest river and drowning every last person. In endless massacres Armenians were rounded up and beaten or tortured to death, or just shot.

Certainly there were extremist leaders in the Young Turk government who were responsible in given situations. But the underlying cause was a combination of fear and hate. Turkish governments for decades had feared the nationalist ambitions of the Armenians living on both sides of the Russian-Turkish border. Instead of engaging in compromise solutions the Young Turk government decided to eliminate the troublesome community. Then, too, the Armenians were hated as the intermediary business class. Fear and hate combined in genocide.

It might be useless to advocate the renunciation of age-old hatreds, but there were certainly alternatives to mass murder.



More recent example of the use of violence is Northern Ireland, where, since 1969, almost a thousand people on this tiny piece of real estate have been murdered in a religious-class war. Tales of violence and atrocities abound. But, again, the causes are not so much the individuals involved as the presence of hate and fear in the small province of Northern Ireland. The conflict is not between armies but between small bands of Protestant and Catholic guerrillas. The seemingly endless bombings, murders, sniping, arson and looting are rooted in 400 years of Protestant domination and 120 years of British colonial rule. Protestants are the élite, the landed, the wealthy and the educated. In Ulster one in every five urban Catholic males is unemployed and lives in a household supported by women. Catholic agitation for civil rights in the 1960's has been countered by a stubborn Protestant determination to prevent any concessions.

In this struggle there has until recently been virtu-

ally no dialogue or tendency toward collective bargaining. Locked in mutual fear and hate, the parties see little alternative to the use of violence to resolve their problems.

Unlike the Burundi situation, local institutions, traditions and leaders in Northern Ireland have prevented the terrorism from degenerating into a communal bloodbath. And, like the Burundi situation, the United States and other major powers have refrained from taking any action in Northern Ireland on the basis that it would constitute interference in the internal affairs of Great Britain and/or that it would be counterproductive.

In Malaysia violence has been stopped, not because people have forgotten past fears and hatreds, but because of a thoroughly practical solution—separation.

In 1963 the new country of Malaysia was formed from the federation of the former British Crown Colonies—Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak and Sabrah. Just two short years later, Singapore left the federation because of communal violence and race riots.

The separation came about as a result of divergent political and economic interests between the two chief Malaysian groups, the Chinese and the Malays. Divergent interests were clearly exacerbated by racial mistrust. In 1965 bitterness between Chinese and Malays broke out into communal violence and rioting. The leaders of the predominantly Chinese community in Singapore and the predominantly Malay community in Malaya obviously felt that the fears and hatreds were too deep to attempt to work things out to a common economic advantage and went their own "independent" ways. The bloodshed ended.

Some theoreticians had hoped that the economic advantages of union would have motivated the Chinese and Malay communities to overcome the hates and fears of the past. But they did not, and an intermediary solution was adopted. By giving up the goal of living together and establishing separate nation-states, Chinese and Malays implicitly accepted the reality of their mutual distrust, but they also greatly reduced the possibility of continuing communal strife.

The island republic of Cyprus traces its civilization to two thousand years before Christ and has been the scene of perpetual fighting between the Greek majority (about 80 per cent) and the Turkish minority (about 20 per cent). Since the killing went on despite the local Greek and Turkish leaders, in 1964 a United Nations peacekeeping force was stationed in Cyprus. While there have been several outbreaks of communal strife, the peacekeeping force, coupled with other regulations concerning separate communities, is generally credited with preventing the situation from deteriorating into a bloodbath.

Two countries which in the last decade have verged on an outbreak of communal violence because of racial, ethnic or religious fears are Canada and Belgium. In Canada the French Canadians have for some time regarded themselves as the depressed minority group. While the original Canadian promise was that the French language and culture would have full equality with the English, the promise has not been kept. Top jobs in the civil service were traditionally reserved for the English-speaking. The language of the civil service has until recently been English. Conflict between the English and French communities is rooted in conflicting ideas of life and law. The English were mostly Protestant monarchists, while French Canadians were primarily agrarian and poor. For the most part the English-speaking Canadians became the ruling élite, both economically and socially.

The 1950's and 1960's saw renewed efforts on the part of the French Canadians to obtain their equal rights. While most French Canadians are following the route of collective bargaining, some pursue the more radical goal of separation, by violence if necessary. Radical separatist groups have engaged in bombing, kidnapping, riots and assassination. So far the leaders and institutions of the French-Canadian community have withstood the temptation to use violence to correct social and political problems.

The small, closely populated country of Belgium includes two geographically distinct ethnic groups: the Flemish in the north and the French Walloons in the south. The insistence of each group that its separate identity be maintained has resulted in a division of the country by a "language frontier." This line, established by law in 1932, divides the country in half and safeguards the rights of both Flemish and French languages.

Flemish grievances centered on the ascendancy of the French language and culture. French was the language of the civil service, of the courts and all the traditional hierarchies. In order to acquire an education or to move ahead in business or government the Flemish had to learn a second language. The result has been prolonged tensions, occasional riots and a few people injured or killed. The distinguished University of Louvain was forced to establish two separate campuses at great extra expense to satisfy the desire of each community for its own university. (Interestingly, the Belgian community of 2,500 people in Burundi also divides along Flemish and French lines.)

In both Canada and Belgium the internal traditions and institutions have prevented the tensions from degenerating into a communal bloodbath. The religious, academic and civic leadership in these two countries has played a leading role in keeping negotiations open, in combatting the militants of all sides who advocate the "quick" solution of violence.

Such has not been the case in Burundi. Militant leadership, eager to use violence to correct manifest social and political problems, has been the influential leadership. In two and a half years there I witnessed the injustice of the unequal status of the Hutu in the Burundi community, yet I regret that Hutu leaders used violence to attempt to overthrow the Tutsi-dominated government in the spring of 1972. While the inequalities were obvious even to the most casual observer, at least until April 29, 1972, there was no physical violence. Hutus held four positions in the cabinet, and thousands were serving as clerks and teachers. Several dozen were officers in the army. Various forces were at work to deepen the dialogue that was just beginning. Negotiations, collective bargaining, the use of pressure, all of these tactics would certainly have taken longer to reduce the gap between the two groups, but they would not have resulted in the 1972 bloodbath.

The basic failure in the 1972 Burundi situation was with Burundian institutions and with local Tutsi and Hutu leaders. In the final analysis every community must accept responsibility for assuring that violence will not become a way of life in resolving day-to-day problems. Burundi governmental, religious and academic leaders of both groups failed in their responsibility to take active steps to halt the reprisals once they started. All local leaders, Tutsi and Hutu, were aware of the very sensitive situation and the consequent dangers of using force. Once the violence started, the leaders of both groups were impotent with fear. They just let the killing go on and on.

In May, 1973, young militant Hutu student leaders in Rwanda, Tanzania and Zaire inspired and coordinated a three-pronged attack on Burundi. Again, the Tutsi-dominated government reacted with vengeance. An untold number of Tutsis and Hutus were killed. In this instance, Hutu refugees living in the three neighboring countries criticized the militant Hutu leaders for having organized the ill-fated venture. Violence begets violence, and the violence becomes more atrocious in each instance. This is the sad lesson that the extremists on both sides have not yet learned in Burundi.

The second failure was with the Organization of African Unity. The OAU must be held accountable for its failure to take any action to correct the clear violation of human rights that occurred in Burundi. The OAU is a young and growing institution. It cannot be expected to do everything. But given the importance that the OAU charter attaches to human rights, it is a tragedy that the OAU abdicated its responsibilities in the Burundi situation and remained silent. The OAU has been extremely active in campaigning against the violation of human rights in Southern Africa, but its nonperformance in Burundi raises some question about its commitment to human

rights for all Africans. In the spring of 1973 the OAU was more active in ameliorating the problems. The interest of Tanzanian President Nyerere was at least partially responsible for this. The failure of the OAU was, of course, linked to the failure of African leaders in other countries. They were reluctant to "interfere." While recognizing the dilemma the Burundi "bloodshed" posed for these leaders, their reluctance was a disappointment to many of us connected with the Burundi affair.

A final failure was with the United Nations. The U.N. has donated millions of dollars and millions of words to the cause of human rights in world affairs. In 1972 the U.N. attacked a variety of nations for directly or indirectly violating human rights, but it took no effective action to stop the Burundi genocide. The U.N. did launch a significant relief program, which certainly reduced the suffering among Burundi's displaced persons and refugees.

As with the African leaders, the U.N. posture on the Burundi matter gave the impression that, while the U.N. would exercise itself to protect human rights in Portuguese Africa, Rhodesia and South Africa, it could do nothing in that regard about Burundi. Such a double standard brings into disrepute the universal mandate of the U.N. to protect human rights everywhere.



The burden of ignoring the Burundi bloodbath must be shared more widely. The millions of private citizens throughout the world who have reacted publicly to similar atrocities elsewhere said little or nothing about Burundi. The glare of an aroused international public opinion might have brought an earlier end to the killings. Some lives might have been saved. Governments and government officials are often handicapped in what they can say and do. Private citizens are less restricted and can sound the alarm and organize relief. In the Burundi situation too many waited for governments

and "others" to do something. Some lives might have been saved.

As for the role of the U.S. Government, I believe it responded in an appropriate fashion. Direct unilateral intervention was out of the question. It would have been contrary to our policy of nonintervention in the affairs of African states and would have reactivated the fears of American imperialism in world affairs. It is very doubtful that the American people would have supported any kind of direct, unilateral or multilateral, intervention. As a major power the U.S. could indirectly approach and try to influence the OAU, African leaders and the U.N. to carry out their responsibilities. This the U.S. Government did as effectively as possible, although with no stunning success. At least the Americans tried. The other major powers ignored the situation. Only Belgium and the Vatican joined the United States in working indirectly to halt the killings.

Since American companies are the largest single buyer of Burundi's coffee, some have suggested the U.S. Government should have launched a boycott. This too would have been ineffective, I believe, and would only have hurt the poor, the Hutus of Burundi. On the other hand, a campaign led by private American citizens could have had a symbolic role of conveying to the world that the American people were concerned about the violation of human rights in Burundi. We need to encourage less dependence on the government and more on what people as people can do in these situations.

In the wake of the Burundi horror the search for ways to prevent a recurrence goes on, for all the elements in the equation that caused the previous bloodbath are still there. There are, of course, no easy solutions, and any solution must start with the Burundi people, who alone can resolve the long-term problem. But the family of man must accept responsibility for the suffering of other members of the family. Over 150,000 bodies are buried in the foothills of Burundi.

I write with a feeling of great sadness, for I see no end to the business. The work of reducing age-old hatreds and fears is long and difficult. Armenia, Ireland, Malaysia, Cyprus, Canada and Belgium comprise a sad and unended litany of horror. Perhaps there are lessons to be retrieved from the Burundi experience. It would be a real tragedy if all the sadness in the foothills of Burundi is in vain.