

New York, Thursday 16 December 1999

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

STATEMENT ON RECEIVING THE REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT INQUIRY INTO THE ACTIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS DURING THE 1994 GENOCIDE IN RWANDA

The United Nations was founded at the end of a war during which genocide had been committed on a horrific scale. Its prime objective was to prevent such a conflict from ever happening again. Three years later, the General Assembly adopted a Convention under which States accepted an obligation to "prevent and punish" this most heinous of crimes.

In 1994 the whole international community -- the United Nations and its Member States -- failed to honour that obligation. Approximately 800,000 Rwandans were slaughtered by their fellow countrymen and women, for no other reason than that they belonged to a particular ethnic group. That is genocide in its purest and most evil form.

All of us must bitterly regret that we did not do more to prevent it. There was a United Nations force in the country at the time, but it was neither mandated nor equipped for the kind of forceful action which would have been needed to prevent or halt the genocide. On behalf of the United Nations, I acknowledge this failure and express my deep remorse.

In view of the enormity of what happened, and the questions that continued, five years after the event, to surround the actions of the United Nations before and during the crisis, in March this year I commissioned a completely independent Inquiry into those actions, with the approval of the Security Council.

The Inquiry enjoyed full and unrestricted access to United Nations records, including internal documents and cables. It has now completed its work, and its findings have been made public. I thank Mr. Carlsson, Professor Han and General Kupolati for their Report, which is thorough and objective. I fully accept their conclusions, including those which reflect on officials of the UN Secretariat, of whom I myself was one. I also welcome the emphasis which the Inquiry has put on the lessons to be learnt from this tragedy, and the careful and well argued recommendations it has made with the aim of ensuring that the United Nations can and will act to prevent or halt any other such catastrophe in the future.

These recommendations merit very serious attention, leading to prompt and effective action -- by the Secretariat, by the Security Council, and by the international community as a whole.

As the Report itself acknowledges, some steps have already been taken over the past few years to improve the capacity of the United Nations to respond to conflicts, and specifically to respond to some of the mistakes made in Rwanda. But much remains to be done. It was precisely in the hope of preventing further such tragedies that, in my address to the General Assembly in September, I called on the international community to reflect on ways in which the United Nations could intervene more promptly, and more effectively, to prevent or halt massive and systematic violations of human rights.

More broadly, in my own Report on the equally shameful events which occurred at Srebrenica only a year after those in Rwanda, I urged Member States to engage in a process of reflection and analysis, aimed at improving the capacity of the United Nations to respond to various forms of conflict. I intend very soon to make further recommendations on the form which this process should take.

Both Reports -- my own on Srebrenica, and that of the independent Inquiry on Rwanda -- reflects a profound determination to present the truth about these calamities. Of all my aims as Secretary-General, there is none to which I feel more deeply committed than that of enabling the United Nations never again to fail in protecting a civilian population from genocide or mass slaughter.