



It is a great honor to introduce Kebedech Tekleab. She is a new member of Women's Caucus for Art UN Program, and a colleague of Liz DiGiorgio at CUNY. She is an artist with a unique vision. Kebedech will be actively participating in events and programs at the United Nations. We are proud to have her with us, and look forward to working with her. (Maureen Burns-Bowie)

Kebedech Tekleab is a studio artist and Assistant Professor of Art at CUNY Queensborough Department of Art and Design. As a teenager, she had survived ten years of imprisonment in brutal concentration camps in Somalia during the Ethio-Somali War. She was a graduate student at Howard University developing her thesis "Humanity in Descent: Visual Images Of Human Suffering," which focused on global humanitarian issues. At the onset of the Rwandan Genocide, she started working on a series of paintings that became part of her thesis. Among the series, "The River in Rwanda," acrylic on canvas, 1944, is on a permanent display at The Holocaust Museum in Skokie Illinois.

## **INTERNATIONAL DAY OF REFLECTION ON THE GENOCIDE IN RWANDA**

April 11, 2016

By Kebedech Tekleab

When Ms. Maureen Burns-Bowie from the WCA invited my colleague Professor Liz Di Giorgio and me to attend the 22nd commemoration of the Rwanda genocide at the UN on April 11, we both knew that it was going to impact us profoundly.

Liz has been attending "Thursday Briefings" at the UN, representing CUNY-QCC and exposing college students to global issues for several years. For me it was a first attendance at the UN that took me back to the moment I saw footage of the victims of the genocide when the news broke in 1994. Those images would influence my work for several years. Like many people around the world, I was shocked and overwhelmed by the genocide. I was also specially moved as it had been only six years since I survived ten years of imprisonment in brutal concentration camps in Somalia during the Ethio-Somali war.

Ms. Cristina Gallach, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information opened the program as moderator.

The commemoration of one of the greatest human tragedies of the 20th century, which was both universal and unique at the same time, began with the lighting of candles and a moment of silence.

It was universal because the world has seen other genocides, holocausts, slavery, as well as several nameless massacres before and after. It is unique because it was waged under specific socioeconomic and political conditions that gave the Rwandan genocide its own hue in the tapestry of human tragedy.

There were six powerful presenters. The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon's opening remarks focused not only on remembering but also on proactively identifying as well as preventing genocide.

“Genocide is not a single event; it is a process that takes time and preparation.” He warned that “One of the key warning signs of genocide is the spread of hate speech in public discourse and the media.”

The same concept was shared by Ms. Frida Umuhoza, a writer and a child survivor of the Rwandan genocide. At a young age Frida had to learn how her ethnicity had been degraded by others. The lesson came from her friend, also six years old, who understood the impact of the distorted perception that caused the killing of her grandfather because he was a Tutsi.

“You already know, at the age of six, that you are a snake and a cockroach and you are less than a human being,” Frida said.

It took Frida another eight years, at the age of fourteen to see the fruits of that hatred monstrously evolving into genocide. Metaphorically and literally speaking, the young Frida was saved from the grave pit where fifteen of her family members were killed and buried; some of them wounded and buried alive. Her details were chilling, but she spoke with great conviction with no trace of sentimentality. She reminded the world that the genocide in Rwanda didn’t happen overnight, a truth that had been mentioned earlier by the Secretary General of the UN. We, the audience, were walked through ravages of humanity guided by her compelling story, perhaps as spectators at first until her closing remark “Don’t say never again, act never again” overwhelmed and thrust us into the active perpetual nature of the human tragedy we live with.

The second survivor story came from Ms. Nelly Mukazayire. Unlike Frida, she was not harmed physically but psychologically as a child of a perpetrator. She wove her personal story with a task of representing the present day Rwanda as a Deputy Director of Cabinet in the Office of the President, President Paul Kagame.

“Being a child of a genocide perpetrator, my mother who is serving a life sentence in a Kigali prison for her role during the Genocide, I am the result of that defining policy of equal rights and opportunities to all Rwandans and a living testimony of the new Rwanda.” she said.

Nelly was twelve years old when the genocide broke. Narrating the complexity of her identity in an attempt to move forward in post genocide Rwanda, in her teenage years, she said, “In one moment I was a survivor with the father who is a Tutsi who has lost his relatives and family during the genocide. The next minute I was the child of the most famous genocide perpetrator and a woman.”

Her narrative gave the genocide a three-dimensional face by bringing the story of the perpetrators alongside that of the victims. The impact of the hateful demagoguery against the Tutsi did not only divide the country but also split families, even the identities of single individuals. Hate-based ideology is a destruction of the fabric of humanity to the cellular level. Having to go through the atrocities of man’s inhumanity to man is a horrible experience; one that leaves a lifelong psychological, emotional, as well as physical impression. If this is true, walking on this earth in the midst of victims as a child of a perpetrator is devastating with the additional burden of shame to it. But the fact is a line of sanity is a narrow one that could be easily crossed by distractive agitation such as hate speech and other forms of propaganda camouflaged mostly as a sentiment of patriotism and nationalism.

Such mass agitation is a deadly cocktail of euphoria that reduces human beings to mere adjectives and nouns, which can be destroyed without guilt.

The President of the General Assembly, Mr. Mogens Lykketoft’s presentation focused on three important issues: recognition, action, and prevention of genocide.

He talked about responsibilities of the UN and its member-states to identify genocides such as Rwanda’s and act upon it when it takes place, prevent it from happening, and educate the public not to repeat itself.

“Today, we honor the memories of those whose lives were taken or so dramatically impacted by 1994. We also remember the international community’s collective failure to recognize the warning signs of genocide and to react quickly and decisively.”

He was referring to the devastating massacre of the majority Tutsis, that took one hundred days to kill more than a million of them. One hundred days is too short of a time to lose 100 thousand lives and it is too long of a time to recognize the nature of the massacre to intervene and take action. It was the burden of this reality that weighed in the presentation of Mr. Mogens Lykketoft.

The last two speakers focused on several issues such as the importance of remembrance and the recurring tendency of genocide denials.

Juxtaposing the history of the Holocaust in World War II and the Rwandan genocide twenty-two years ago, Mr. Malcolm I. Hoenlein, Executive Vice Chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, began his presentation by asking questions: "The question is why remember? Why should we recall the horrors of what happened? What purpose does it serve?"

His critical analysis of the present day indifference set the tone of his presentation. Quoting Moses from biblical scripture, he gave an emphasis to the matter: "The greatest dangers to the world are not wars and external threats but apathy, indifference, and ignorance. Those are the challenges we could never overcome."

While his presentation rightfully supported remembrance over indifference, he also identified the colors of remembrance when he said, "Central to every Jewish holiday is one concept, one word – *zahor* – remembrance, the word chosen to symbolize the Holocaust, not avenge or revenge but remember."

Remembering the horrors of the recent past without thinking of revenge is complex. That is why it has become the subject of continuous dialogue and debate in postwar countries. The danger of genocide doesn't end when it stops. How to move forward in post-genocide countries is a daunting question. While reconciliation is a favored solution so far, and we have exemplary processes in countries such as South Africa and Rwanda, its long-term impact could be dependent on the way the process of reconciliation is conducted. Regarding this concern, the late African scholar Professor Ali Mazrui once said, "Beware of the whole truth in South Africa, Rwanda and Germany. Because the full truth can be devastating unless you have acquired a capacity to shorten the memory of hate. The truth can be a deadly impediment to healing. The secret of national healing is an effort to get our history selectively wrong."

Mr. Eugène-Richard Gasana, Minister of State in Charge of Cooperation and Permanent Representative of Rwanda to the United Nations, spoke with obvious emotion and concern about the present day Rwanda and the political air of the country inside as well as outside of the region. He commented upon the modern day dissemination of ideas through the Internet. How the comfort of anonymity that diminishes accountability makes the writing and rewriting of history vulnerable.

He emphasized the issue of denial and the importance of naming.

"Honoring those who lost their lives has been smeared by those who indulge in genocide denial, those who drive people to deny, trivialize, and even distort the figures of the killings. The latter continues to play out to this day, when 800,000 killings are cited, instead of 1 million. Another tactic used is to deflect attention and for perpetrators to rebrand themselves as heroes and not villains."

Recognizing a conflict and giving it a name is both important and complex at the same time. The process at its best saves lives. When caught in the web of political intricacy and bureaucracy, it leaves the burning conflict untreated. What happened in Rwanda is being repeated in many places such as Darfur. Naming is important for the legality of international intervention, for the sake of historic classification, for policymaking, for scholarly purposes, for healing in the aftermath, etc., but for the victims, whose lives are targeted by any kind of crime against humanity, time is more relevant.

The well-attended event on April 11, 2016, had a diverse audience that included a good number of young people.

The heaviness as well as the importance of the commemoration was complemented by the wonderful performance of Mrs. Pauletta Washington and her band accompanied by students and teachers from American Sign Language. The performance was both uplifting and contemplative. Who else could have been a better fit for the caliber of the event other than Mrs. Washington, who has dedicated her talent to give voices to the voiceless?

The highlight of the commemoration was the testimony of the two young female survivors who gave the Rwandan genocide not only the name to recognize but also a face to remember.