

Shake Hands with an Angel – Meeting With Lt. Gen Romeo Dallaire

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Recently I had the honor and privilege of meeting one of the outstanding humanitarians and outspoken advocates for Human Rights of our time -Lieutenant- General Honorable Roméo A. Dallaire, (Ret'd) Senator at the York University. His reputation reaches to many distant lands. Many Sri Lankans know him as the commander of the UN Mission in Rwanda during the Rwandan genocide. Although he is a Canadian Icon he belongs to the entire world that believe in peace and equality. Today he is serving as a Senator in his native Quebec and dedicated his life to eradicate the plague of child soldiers around the globe.

Peace Keeping Mission in Rwanda

Gen Romeo Dallaire served in the UN peace keeping mission in Rwanda during its darkest period. He encountered the worst of humanity in Rwanda and oversaw the murder of 800,000 human beings. In front of his eyes genocide took place and the Civilized World did nothing to prevent it. He was left alone to face the consequences. He went for the UN peace mission in 1993 returned in August 1994 as a tormented and disappointed man with a heavy emotional baggage.

Often peace keeping missions are tougher than the combat missions. Peace keepers undergo tremendous physical and psychological pressure following the restricted orders to intervene. Sometimes they are compelled to watch atrocities take place in front of their eyes and they are powerless to prevent it. Many peace keepers suffer from psychological repercussions after their deployments. In 2006 the commander of U.N. peacekeepers in Haiti, 58-year-old Urano Matta Bacellar committed suicide following depression that he suffered during the peace keeping mission.

Gen Romeo Dallaire too became a victim of his hazardous peace keeping mission in Rwanda. His world was falling apart and he had to fight to regain his sanity. He never gave up. He triumphed against all odds. Gen Romeo Dallaire's story is full of courage humanism, and genuine effort to fight for those who were deprived of basic human rights.

My Rwandan Friend Denzel

For me Gen Romeo Dallaire 's story has a special meaning. Still I am anxious about my Rwandan friend Denzel. Denzel was one of my batch mates at the Medical Faculty and he had come from Kigali Rwanda. "I cannot forget your name" said Denzel when he first met me in 1986. "Your name is similar to my country's name , your name is Ruwan and my country is Rwanda what a nice coincidence? Indeed he was a pleasant guy with full of personality. He danced elegantly to the song "September" that is sung by the Earth Wind and Fire. I did not know whether Denzel was a Tootsie or a Hutu , all I knew was he was a nice human being and he was my friend. After finishing his medical degree in 1993 he went to Rwanda and most certainly worked as a Doctor. His life must have been changed by the events that occurred in Rwanda in 1994 when ethnic clashes broke out. I don't know whether Denzel is still alive. If he is dead let his soul find peace and happiness according to his religious beliefs.

The Rwandan Genocide

Rwanda is a beautiful country and it has been called 'a tropical Switzerland in the heart of Africa. The country is situated in east-central Africa and surrounded by the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Tanzania, and Burundi. Rwanda was colonized by the Germans and then by the Belgians. Colonial rulers maintained the dirty policy of divide and rule that created clashes between Hutu and Tutsi tribal groups. The Tutsi constituted only about ten percent of Rwanda's population and the Hutu nearly 90 percent. The colonial ruler's trick was simple. The Belgians gave the Tutsi all the leadership positions to rule over majority Hutu population. This created high emotions among the majority Hutu population. Although the Hutu and Tutsi shared a common past, solidified ethnic divisions that were created by the colonial rulers created high tensions between majority Hutu and minority Tutsi groups. After the struggle for independence from Belgium these two ethnic groups had frequent clashes. The animosity between the two groups continued for decades.

On the 6th of April 1994 when President Juvénal Habyarimana of Rwanda was returning from a summit in Tanzania a surface-to-air missile shot his plane and killed the President. President Juvénal Habyarimana was a Hutu and this event ignited the age old rivalry. The Hutu extremists blamed the Tutsis for the assassination of the President, and began one of the biggest slaughters of the human history.

The slaughter continued for 100 days and wiped out over 800,000 Tutsi men women and children. During the genocide moderate Hutus were eliminated in order to have a total control over the annihilation. Most Tutsis were killed brutally by hand weapons, often machetes or clubs. Many faced torture before their horrible deaths. The women were raped. The media that

was controlled by the Hutu extremists had been continuously spouting hate. During the genocide the Radio broadcast played an ignoble role revealing the hideouts of the victims and how to continue the massacre of Tutsis. The road blocks were set up to hunt down fleeing innocent people. It is estimated that some 200,000 people who were poisoned by hate and prejudice participated in the perpetration of the Rwandan genocide. As a result of the ethnic cleansing over 3 million had been displaced.

Rwandan Genocide and Gen Romeo Dallaire

Gen Romeo Dallaire was the commander of the UN Mission in Rwanda during the Rwandan genocide. When he first came to Rwanda he realized that the tensions were mounting. He warned the UN and Super Powers of possible ethnic cleansing. But his forewarnings were overlooked and his forces were cut down from 3000 to a mere 500 men. It was a disastrous decision. Rwandan genocide took place before his very eyes. Over 800,000 people perished within 100 days. The killing rate was eight hundred murders per day and nearly 333 people per an hour. Every second five people died and the Western nations did nothing to stop it. He was ordered not to intervene. The Rwandans were abandoned to their fate.

Three days after the Rwandan killings began; about 1000 European troops arrived in Kigali. They did not come to stop the genocide but they had come to evacuate their own nationals. Despite his orders to withdraw from Rwanda Gen. Dallaire stayed with the helpless population. He was forced to become a spectator to genocide. At one point Gen. Dallaire requested to block the Hutu radio transmissions that was preaching hate and encouraging people to kill Tutsis. According to one memo the US officials assessed the cost of jamming the Hutu hate broadcasts at \$8,500 per flight-hour. But the Clinton administration refused to disrupt the radio broadcast. The killings went on.

Gen Dallaire did his utmost and saved many lives as possible with his limited resources. Constantly he pleaded the UN and US officials to send more peace keepers and send emergency rations. The things were moving very slow giving him enormous mental pressure and frustration. The UN had spent more human resources, more money on former Yugoslavian peace mission and they conveniently disregarded the helpless African country. The slaughter continued. Several times he disobeyed his high command when he was ordered to withdraw from Rwanda. He was the only help and link for the abandoned Rwandan people. He stayed until the helps arrived. He left Rwanda with severe emotional scars. Rwanda was a failure by humanity to stop the genocide, despite timely warnings by people like Gen Dallaire.

Gen. Romeo Dallaire came back to Canada after his peace mission and tried to settle down. But things were hard. Rwandan peace mission was a moral minefield to Gen Dallaire. He could not

forget the image of slaughtered human corpses on the roads and in rivers. He heard the outcry of the helpless victims. He could smell the decomposing human flesh. Above all the betrayal by the UN officials and other civilized Western Countries put him in a dilemma situation. He felt that he had a responsibility over those perished humans.

Following overwhelming psychological tension Gen. Romeo Dallaire moved towards negative stress coping style. He started abusing alcohol. The doctors diagnosed that Gen. Romeo Dallaire was suffering from PTSD. Once he attempted to end his life by committing suicide. The Canadian Army discharged Gen. Dallaire under medical grounds. Hence his 35 year distinguished military career was over.

Although the illness wrecked him it could not destroy his deep love and respect for humanity. He found a new powerful weapon to fight back his illness. He dedicated his life to become a human rights promoter with genuine devotion. He revealed the entire world what took place in Rwanda and his efforts to stop the genocide. His conscience was clear. He adopted positive stress coping style, went for psychotherapy and continued his medication. Within a short period he was able to achieve a remarkable progress. He was able to keep his PTSD symptoms at bay. He was heading towards a complete recovery.

In 2006 on the Holocaust Memorial Day Gen Romeo Dallaire was giving an interview to Jamie Owen. He revealed his Rwandan experience adding the following remarkable words which captured the hearts and minds of the people.

“ One of the instruments that the extremists would use during the genocide to gain more food and water and medical supplies, would be to use very young children; five; six and such ages, put them in the middle of the road and keep them there in order to stop the convoys with those resources coming through. If the children moved away they simply killed them outright with their machetes. And so on one day I was going between the lines, and up ahead there was a child of about three or four years old, and in no-man’s-land we [were] not going to abandon a child, so we slowed down expecting an ambush, we stopped, jumped out with a couple of soldiers there was nobody. We went around to the huts to see if someone would take care of this child, and all we found were bodies of people who had been killed five or six weeks earlier on, decomposing and half eaten by wild dogs and rats, and as we looked around we lost the child. So we went back and found him in a hut where there were two adults male, female, and some children in advanced stages of decomposition. He was sitting there as if it was home. I took the child and I brought him into the middle of the road and I looked at him, and this young three or four year old boy with a bloated stomach and scars and dirt in rags, flies all around him, but then I looked into his eyes, and what I saw in the eyes of that child was exactly what I saw in the eyes of my young son before I left Canada. They were the eyes of a human child and they were

exactly the same. We have a responsibility to protect, we do not have the right to assess and to establish a priority within humanity, for all humans are human and not one of us is more human than the other.”

The Hotel Rwanda

The movie Hotel Rwanda was a message film and a gripping piece of drama that disclosed the outside world the magnitude of planned genocide that occurred in Rwanda. The film recounted the true story of a courageous simple man Paul Rusesabagina (played by Don Cheadle) the assistant manager of Milles Collines Hotel who became another Schindler. Being a Hutu Paul Rusesabagina risked his life to save fellow Tutsis from the extremist Hutu groups. For me the story of Gen Romeo Dallaire and Paul Rusesabagina were highly inspirational and it led me to write a poem – The Eye Witness of Hotel Rwanda.

The Eyewitness of Hotel Rwanda

From a tiny window of Hotel Rwanda

I saw two tribes killing each other

Man against man

Brother against brother

I witnessed killing and massacre

The insane evil Radio

Controlled the minds of people

Constantly giving commands

Go go go

Go and kill cockroaches

The good men of yesterday

Turned in to savages

No remorse or guilt

Seeking blood and flesh

I saw little orphans in fear of death

Looking for safe places

No place to run

No place to hide

They were abandoned by the rest of the civilized world

Shake Hands With the Devil – The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda

Rwandan experience was an eye opener for General Romeo Dallaire. He had negative feelings that the so called civilized nations didn't come to rescue Rwandans probably because some humans were considered less human than others. He often questioned himself after he returned from Rwanda – “are all humans human or are some more human than others? Do some count less than others? He needed answers. He found an emotional cri de coeur in his book Shake Hands with the Devil – The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda. General Dallaire has written a powerful story of betrayal, racism and double standards of international politics.

Gen. Dallaire's outstanding book on his Rwandan experience “Shake Hands With the Devil – The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda” is a reproachful indictment of world leaders and UN bureaucrats who turned their back when Rwandan people were in crisis. In this book Dallaire describes the vivid events that took place during the genocide and he further says that even the peace had been murdered in that gorgeous African country. He truly counts himself among its casualties. “Shake Hands With the Devil – The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda” is a severe blow to the UN double standards and for those who exercised in armchair ethics during a human crisis situation.

Once giving an interview to Alex Roslin Gen. Dallaire remarked.

“The devil took control of paradise on earth and fed on the blood of the people we were supposed to protect. “I know there is a God,” he replied, “because in Rwanda I shook hands with the devil.”

His outstanding book “Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda” was awarded the Governor General’s Literary Award for Non-Fiction in 2004. Shake Hands with the Devil is now a motion picture directed by Roger Spottiswoode and starring Roy Dupuis and James Gallanders.

Gen Romeo Dallaire ‘s Life Long Mission – Child Soldiers Initiative

After Rwanda Gen Romeo Dallaire has given a leadership in a project to develop a conceptual base for the elimination of the use of child soldiers. In his best-selling book “They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children,” Lieutenant-General Romeo Dallaire suggests to promote Zero Force, an international campaign to eradicate the use of child soldiers. He is determined to fight to eradicate the use of child soldiers in armed conflicts. It is a mission to which Gen Dallaire has committed himself for the rest of his life.

According to the Canadian International Development Agency, worldwide, in any given year, over 300,000 children under 18 are exploited in armed conflicts as child soldiers and sex slaves.

Gen Romeo Dallaire’s present mission has a great significance to Sri Lanka. Over 7000 children were forcibly recruited and sent to war by the LTTE during 1983 – 2009. In 1998 the special representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Mr. Olara Otunnu, visited Sri Lanka and requested the Tamil Tigers to release these children under humanitarian ground. According to UNICEF data, there were a total of 6,183 cases of child recruitment by the LTTE in five years after the February 2002 Ceasefire Agreement. Out of this 3,732 were boys and 2,451 were girls. The UNICEF too constantly urged the LTTE to stop recruiting *child soldiers in Sri Lanka. Over the years these children* witnessed some of the most disturbing experiences that affected them physically, mentally and emotionally. Children were abducted and forced into weapon training and they were subjected to torture, indoctrination, sleep deprivation and often forced to commit atrocities.

Professor Daya Somasundaram of the University of Jaffna did extensive study on the psychological problems that were experienced by the Sri Lankan child soldiers. According to Professor Somasundaram child soldiers suffer from numerous psychological and psychiatric ailments.

Death and injury apart, the recruitment of children becomes even more abhorrent when one sees the psychological consequences. In children who came to our unit for treatment, we found a whole range of conditions from neurotic conditions like somatisation, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder to more severe reactive psychosis and what has been termed malignant post-traumatic stress disorder. This leaves children as complete psychological and social wrecks. Our observation has been that children are particularly vulnerable during their impressionable formative period, causing permanent scarring of their developing personality. Military leaders have expressed their preference for younger recruits as “they are less likely to question orders from adults and are more likely to be fearless, as they do not appreciate the dangers they face. Their size and agility makes them ideal for hazardous assignments. (Somasundaram 2002)

In his book *Power Games in War and Peace* Prof Harendra de Silva the eminent paediatrician and the former Chairman of the National Child Protection Authority points out that Sri Lankan child soldiers undergo lifelong physical and psychological damage and it is crucial to offer wide-ranging rehabilitation to the victims. Prof. Harendra de Silva further says that in Sri Lankan society a child is often depicted as a flower, and the national flower of Sri Lanka is the blue lotus. The view of the child at the same level of the adult indicates the importance of looking at children with the same prominence. Therefore the children should be protected from physical and psychological harm.

In 2002 during the CFA I was able to visit some villages in Mulankavil area in Kilinochchi District to conduct medical camps that were organized by the IMPA (Independent Medical Practitioners Association Sri Lanka). During that time period it was a LTTE held area and many civilians came to seek medical treatment. There were a number of children with battle wounds and later we came to know that these children were forced to engage in military offensives by the LTTE in their fight against the Sri Lankan Army. Some children were less than 16 years of age. It was a devastating moment for the doctors who had come from the South of Sri Lanka to treat these children. Some doctors were hiding their faces. I saw tears in their eyes. This incident stirred me to write the poem “Yesterday’s Child.

Yesterday s Child

Yesterday you were an innocent child

Today you are a killing machine holding a T56

No feelings no penitence or passion

What an unhealthy transformation

Yesterday I saw you were going to school

You carried books in your hand and I could see a naive smile

Today I see blood in your hands

They turned you in to a Chucky doll

No longer I see your childish smile

Instead I see the atrocious face

The face filled with anger and hate

You cast a deadly shadow

What happened to the yesterday s child?

Who stole his childhood? and why?

Fruitful and innocent youth

Turned in to dust that will never return

Yesterday s child no longer you exist

The innocence is no more

All you see is a wasteland without a human touch

The land filled with emptiness and sorrow

After the military defeat of the LTTE the Sri Lankan Government released all the child soldiers those who were held by the Tamil Tigers and conducted a rehabilitation program to integrate the child soldiers in to the society. The children were sent back to schools. Certain success has been achieved in these rehabilitation programs. It is imperative to know that the Chief *Minister* in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka Mr. *Pilleyan* (Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan) was a former LTTE child soldier. Although rehabilitation programs were conducted mental health experts point out that some former child soldiers suffer from malignant PTSD and they need far-reaching therapy as well as integrated psychosocial rehabilitation. Therefore the authorities should get help from the international agencies such as Romeo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative to help the former child soldiers of Sri Lanka.

Gen Romeo Dallaire is now extensively working on the problem of war-affected children, and has visited countries where children are used as a weapon of war. Gen Dallaire emphasizes that there are two words that should never go together: “child” and “soldier”. He further says that his ultimate aim is to eradicate the thought of using children as weapons of choice in conflicts.

Michel Chikwanine was a former child soldier who found refuge under Gen Dallaire’s foundation. Michel Chikwanine became a child soldier when he was 5 years old. He was abducted in 1993 by a rebel militia in Congo. He was given a firearm and forced to commit unspeakable atrocities. His childhood was stolen by the warmongering adults. Today he is living in Toronto but still hounded by the awful memories of bloody war. There are thousands of ex child soldiers like Michel Chikwanine who are struggling to integrate in to the mainstream society.

Gen Dallaire with his crusading spirit works in the child soldiers initiative. He is fully dedicated to this noble project which he has made his life’s mission to end the use of children in conflicts and wars.