

TRIBUNA

Europe and Africa: Wars and Peace that Affect Us

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There are life choices that transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. To distinguish what is essential from what is instrumental, to listen to and feel the tears of others as one's own (whether they are shed here or 6,000 kilometers away), to choose to care for people here and there... is to live and honor life completely. Twenty years ago, a group of people who had put caring for people at the center of their lives and their profession decided to go to Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo to serve the suffering, just as today there are people who do the same thing with their neighbors, with vulnerable people in neighborhoods of cities and towns or like those who decide to sacrifice everything in Syria, the waters of the Mediterranean, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Israel, Colombia, Congo or Rwanda. Two decades ago, Flors Sirera (Catalan daughter, sister and nurse), Manuel Madrazo (father of two daughters, and a doctor from Andalusia), and Luis Valtueña (son, brother and journalist from Madrid), working with the NGO Médecins du Monde, decided to devote the last two months of 1996 and the first months of 1997 to people in extreme situations in Central Africa. We remember their lives and the lives they gave, not only their violent deaths twenty years ago in Rwanda (on 18 January 1997, long after the three months of genocidal madness in 1994). Because their lives make sense for everyone... while only they know the meaning of their deaths and how they have affected other lives.

They were not the first; nor will they be the last. Millions of people – yes, millions – all thirsting for equity, justice, peace and fulfillment were living their lives, which were violently taken away, or they were deprived of their homes, their life choices or their

family and friends. Seemingly distant people: Rwandans, Congolese, Burundians, Canadians, Italians, Britons, Belgians... and also seemingly close, like the missionaries Joaquim Vallmajó (26 April 1994, Rwanda), Servando Mayor, Julio Rodríguez, Miguel Ángel Isla and Fernando de la Fuente (31 October 1996, DR Congo) or Isidro Uzcudún (10 June 2010, Rwanda). Aid workers and missionaries killed because they were inconvenient witnesses to the crimes of the victors (the Rwandan Patriotic Front) in Rwanda and Congo.

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What is the situation in Rwanda or the Democratic Republic of Congo now? Are they at war? At peace? Living in democracy? Although a complex analysis of both countries would exceed these lines, what we can say is that they live in a situation of intense direct, structural and cultural violence in all their dimensions, in the sense suggested by Galtung or Lederach. Although the international community highlights the economic progress of these countries, with growth rates that we would like to have in our own, the presidents of both countries, Paul Kagame and Joseph Kabila respectively, were key players in successive wars and want to hold on to power and to their privileges as long as they can.

Despite their alleged involvement in crimes against humanity, genocide, war crimes, torture, forced disappearances and systematic repression, Kagame and Kabila are untouchable in their presidential status; they therefore want to retain it as long as possible while the people they supposedly serve die, in every respect. With different words and in different contexts both claim to know the will of their people, and express their readiness to bend to their will and stand again for election. Here is a simple example to illustrate the contrast between the “saviors” and “their” peoples. In the previous presidential elections in Rwanda, in 2010, the incumbent president, Kagame,

was re-elected with 93 percent of the vote; in 2003 he “obtained” 94 percent of the vote. These are the headlines we receive in the West. A few words of admonishment from the UN, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch after the elections and... that’s it (amid the scandalous complicity of several states in the international community and Western multinationals with disgraceful geostrategic and geo-economic interests in Central Africa).

We overlook many things: for example, Victoire Ingabire, a brave woman (like Flors), a Rwandan mother and wife living in Holland who decides to return to her country in January 2010 to stand in the presidential elections in Rwanda. Upon arrival at the airport, she clamors for democracy, calls for a change of president without resorting to the army or to violence (as had happened in the country until then), demands that all those responsible for crimes be brought to justice, advocates recognition of all victims (not only the officially recognized ones, the Tutsis), and advocates dialogue to overcome war and repression (taking the conclusions of the Inter-Rwandan Dialogue to Rwanda. In the following months the Kagame regime does not allow her to register her party, then arrests, tortures and sentences her to seven years in prison for rebellion. When she appeals her sentence, the Superior Court doubles it to fifteen years. Since then, like many others, she is a political prisoner. And she is lucky to be alive; many others aren’t. She has appealed her sentence to the African Court of Human Rights and the Kagame regime tried unsuccessfully to withdraw from the international court.

Although it is not a good omen that this court has accepted an organization close to the Kagame regime as an *amicus curiae*, but not, however, international organizations, including African, Catalan and Spanish ones, there is still hope that the possible violation of Victoire’s human rights will be analyzed with rigor and impartiality in the trial scheduled for 17 March¹. Meanwhile the Rwandan president has managed to modify the Constitution to be able to stand again this year for a third reelection and continue as president until 2024.

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Despite obvious differences, all of this reminds me of episodes we went through during the civil war and dictatorship in this country. In October 1990 Kagame and his men invade Rwanda from Uganda and initiate a war to seize (lost) power. They do not completely succeed and the war degenerates into genocide. After 100 days of multidirectional murderous madness, he takes power by force in July 1994, initiating a harsh repression in his country (in addition to two wars in neighboring DR Congo, which continue to produce thousands of refugees in Africa and Europe), recasting himself as a democrat in the international community while remaining a systematically repressive dictator. This year he will probably be reelected president with almost 100 percent of the vote. I have the impression that individuals and peoples have less need for liberators of the fatherland, populists and providers of material freedom (in the form of visionary leaders and/or leaders of multinational corporations) and more of a need for citizens who are at the service of individuals and peoples.

The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, which was set up to investigate the most serious crimes committed in this country (only in 1994), has investigated only one part of the conflict and has not wanted to investigate the death of the missionary Vallmajó, or those of Hutu and Tutsi bishops and religious workers, or Hutu and Twa victims. It has only condemned some twenty Hutu leaders of the Habyarimana regime against which Kagame fought. This court cannot investigate the death of Flors and her companions in 1997 or the rest of the Spanish, Rwandan and Congolese victims. The International Criminal Court cannot do so either since it is only competent to investigate crimes committed after 2002.

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That is why the relatives of Flors Sirera and the Catalan, Spanish and Rwandan victims, together with prominent public institutions (including the town councils of Figueres, Manresa, Navata and Seville) and national and international NGOs, filed a judicial action according to the principle of universal justice. After years of investigation with protected witnesses, the judge issued international arrest warrants for forty members of Rwanda's political-military leadership, beginning with Kagame. From then on there were numerous international impacts², which tried to be neutralized. The last one, the arrest – at the request of a Spanish judge – of General Karake Karenzi in London, who managed to avoid the extradition trial thanks to the maneuvers and political interference of the British prosecution and of Karake's lawyer, Cherie Blair (wife of former prime minister Tony Blair and “free” advisor to Kagame). Furthermore the Spanish government wanted to suppress universal justice, forcing victims to appeal in amparo before the Constitutional Court.

We continue today to focus our attention on Flors, Manuel, Luis, Victoire and all those who, regardless of their position of responsibility, decide to serve individuals and peoples and work for the realization of human rights in more equitable, harmonious and peaceful societies.

1. Victoire Ingabire, already as a political prisoner, was one of the nominees for the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, and is, for the third consecutive year, a candidate for the Catalonia International Prize granted by the Generalitat of Catalonia. She has also been a candidate for the ICIP Peace in Progress Award 2016.

2. For more information on the cause of justice and its impact, see [here](#)

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