

Christians, Violence, and Injustice

by Gary Haugen

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Think back to what you were doing in the spring of 1994. I was leading a regular suburban life, working at the Department of Justice and raising a family outside Washington, DC. Meanwhile, in another part of the globe, in an African country, statistically 80 percent Christian, 800,000 people were being hacked to death by their neighbors in about eight weeks.

The number is hard to comprehend. In 1999, somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 innocent people were taken from their homes and executed in Kosovo. In Rwanda, between 10,000 and 20,000 innocent people were executed every day. The Justice Department assigned me to the United Nations to help direct the international effort to find the leaders and perpetrators of these atrocities, which had grown out of a bitter civil war between two tribes, the Tutsis and the Hutus.

Though relatively low-level violence had gone on for some time, the genocide came suddenly. The Tutsi rebel army was outside the country and the Hutu president seemed, at least to Hutu extremists, to be moving toward some kind of shared power with the Tutsis. The extremists opposed that, setting up militias around the country. Their plan apparently was to take advantage of any chaos in the country to eliminate their Tutsi enemies.

Plan Put into Action

The Hutu president was killed when his plane was shot down. There was plenty of chaos, and the plan was put into action. Within hours Tutsi bodies began to appear in the villages and cities throughout Rwanda. Tutsis had seen this kind of ethnic violence before, so they began to run to schools, stadiums, and churches for safety -- also in the hope that no one would hurt all of the women, children, and elderly people who gathered in these places.

The Hutu militias broke down whatever defenses were set up, and Hutu mobs took over. These were not mobs of elite killer paratroopers but of average people -- farmers, school principals, tailors, clerks. The mobs hacked everybody to death with machetes, iron rods, or big clubs with nails hammered into them.

Cataloguing the Carnage

Eventually, the Tutsi rebel army successfully invaded and kicked the Hutu militia and government out of the country. With peace restored, we went in. I was presented with a list of about 100 mass graves and massacre sites. Most were churches. They were littered with thousands of corpses. Blood lines on the walls were knee-high.

Any murder investigation begins with the body, so we had to catalogue the cause of death and the basic identity -- male, female, child -- of the victims. We would just pick up a skull and start recording by the thousands. Sometimes we had to use bulldozers to uncover the mass graves. This happened in our world, in a country missionaries say was the birthplace of the East African Christian revival.

In a Bombay Brothel

Now shift to another part of the world, India, where we got to know a girl named Joytey. When she was 14 she went to a distant village to earn money as a domestic servant to help her family. After about three months, she began heading home. But four women enticed her onto the wrong train and gave her drugged tea. She woke up in a windowless room on the third floor of a brothel in Bombay.

For the next three years, about 20 customers a day paid small amounts of money to rape this child. By the end, she had been forced to have three abortions. She had engaged in unprotected sex in a city with a horrific AIDS epidemic.

UNICEF says that a million children every year are forced into prostitution. Other experts say it's a million in Asia alone and another million in the rest of the world.

Bonded Slavery

Take the case of another child, named Shawna. When she was 7, she was living with her very, very poor family in a village in India. Her mother was giving birth to her baby brother and needed about \$25 to pay for a doctor. The only way they could get \$25 was from the local moneylender, who demanded that the family sell Shawna to him. She was made to roll cigarettes by hand six days a week, 12 hours a day, sitting in one place on the floor. If Shawna didn't roll 2,000 cigarettes a day, she was beaten. She was paid about six cents a day.

After three years, when we met her at 10 years of age, she was not one penny closer to paying off her debt. This is bonded slavery. While it is illegal in India, we believe there are some 15 million children in such circumstances there, rolling cigarettes, making jewelry, making fireworks, and breaking rocks with little hammers.

Seeking Justice

How do Christians respond? In Scripture there is a constant call to seek justice.

Jesus got upset at the Pharisees because they neglected the weightier matters of the law, which he defined as justice and the love of God. Isaiah 1:17 says, "Learn to live right. See that justice is done. Defend widows and orphans and help those in need." Isaiah 59 is the only place where the word "appalled" is used for the way God feels. Verses 15 and 16 say, "The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene," (NIV). Isaiah 58 complains about the fact that while the people of God are praying and praying and praying, they are not doing anything about the injustice.

God's Character

But the overwhelming nature of violence and injustice in our world can paralyze us and cause us to be disengaged. We can only engage violence and injustice by understanding God's character and attitude toward violence and injustice.

The Bible describes injustice as the abuse of power. In every context in society, some people have more power than others. Using that power to take from other people is injustice.

Injustice has two ingredients: coercion, which includes actual or threatened violence, and deception. Proverbs 10:11 says that "evil hides behind the words of the wicked." John 3:20 reminds us that people who do evil hate the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.

Exposing the Darkness

If you go into the red-light districts of the developing world, you will see women and girls mingling out in front of or on the first floors of the brothels. No one is holding them. They may even be calling for customers to come in. What you don't see are the cages on the third or fourth floor where the children and women are locked away and beaten. It doesn't take long before they give up any attempt to run. The coercion -- the violence -- is hidden.

Therefore, to combat injustice, you always first expose the truth. For example, suppose you're a missionary in Bombay, and you notice that some of the girls aged 13 or 14 in your street program aren't showing up anymore. You ask around and learn that they've been abducted into a brothel run by local police. What could you possibly do about that?

Here's what our organization does. We send Christian professionals whose expertise is shining light where there is darkness. They are called criminal investigators. They infiltrate these brothels either directly or by using other investigative access. They bring surveillance equipment -- tiny cameras, perhaps -- to bring the light of day into these horrific places where children are being forced to be prostitutes. Let's say that you had

in your hands a videotape of these children at a particular place in Bombay, and you've clearly documented the girls, the people holding them, and the conditions.

We take this material to the chief of police. He has a choice. He can either do something about it, or he can do nothing. But if he does nothing, he runs the risk that we will take the information someplace else, and he will be terribly embarrassed. So go ahead and rescue the girls, get your picture in the paper for doing it, and then everybody wins -- except the brothel keepers, of course, who get arrested.

The key is exposing the truth, bringing light to the darkness. There is no darker place than these massive places of forced prostitution. In one of these places a little girl was identified and taken out. When she was in the brothel, she prayed to Jesus that she'd be rescued. Jesus answered that prayer through us. We were able to identify her, work with our police contacts, conduct a raid on the brothel, and get her out. Now she's at a Christian after-care facility. She is not being raped anymore.

In the case of children like Shawna, we looked at the law and learned that all you have to do is get the child to make a claim of bonded labor, and then the burden of proof shifts to the moneylenders to prove that it's not. Also, we took video cameras and interviewed the moneylenders, getting them to brag about all the kids they had in bonded labor. Another tactic was to purchase one of the children by paying off the debt and getting a receipt. That becomes a document, which is an admission on the part of the moneylender that he had bonded them in the past. We took all that evidence to the magistrate and had Shawna and about 500 other bonded slaves released.

A Matter of Showing Up

The tragedy of Rwanda is that nobody intervened. It would have taken very little to stop the violence, because all the killing was done with machetes and sticks. If the United States and the international community had shown up with any kind of military force, the men who were hacking away would have run right back to the villages they had come from. That wouldn't have solved ethnic violence in Rwanda, but it would have stopped the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of innocent people. But nobody showed up.

We, as Christian voters in a world superpower, didn't show up. That is either a sobering reality about the incredible stewardship of power that we as Americans and Christians should have, or it can be a sobering moment of hope to realize that ours is a God of justice, and he's prepared to use us to make a difference.

That's the basis for hope. That's why we can have a passion for confronting violence and injustice in the world. If we begin to believe in and reacquaint ourselves with God's passion for justice, he will perform the miracles necessary to rescue the oppressed. The fantastic and unbelievable thing about it is that God will use us to do it. We are the ones who know Jesus Christ. The world needs a witness of hope, and God

doesn't have another plan apart from us.

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