



For information release

29th June, House of Lords

Lord Cotter: My Lords, I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Quin, on her maiden speech. I shall have to strive very hard to match the ability and fluency that she achieved a short while ago. Perhaps I may say how grateful I am for this opportunity to speak in your Lordships' House for the first time, in particular when we are talking about worldwide events. Most important, I thank enormously all concerned for the support and help that I have been given up to and after my introduction on 5 June, especially the noble Lord, Lord Redesdale, and the noble Baroness, Lady Northover, who is here today, for introducing me on the Floor of the House. I also thank the many noble Lords from all quarters who have made me most welcome, as well as the official staff and everyone for being so supportive.

I should like to mention the introduction packs and information leaflets given to new Peers, which describe the working background and responsibilities of this House. I am sure that all noble Lords would agree that this information reaches the highest standards of presentation and content. Very few commercial firms or other organisations could do better. This information undoubtedly reflects the smooth efficiency and high standards of this House. I hope to do all that I can to justify the encouragement and help that I have received.

I would especially like to avoid an experience that I had early on in my eight years as a Member in the other place. During Prayers, I remember hearing the familiar sound of a mobile phone ringing. I looked around, thinking, "This is outrageous". But wait—the sound seemed to be rather close. In fact, it was coming from my pocket. Imagine my embarrassment when Prayers finished and there were cries from the opposite Benches, led by the redoubtable Dennis Skinner: "It's him. It's him". Fortunately for me, the Speaker, now the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, chose to ignore it and proceeded with business. Today, I have not only switched off my mobile phone but left it in my office just to be sure.

I am glad that my title "of Congresbury" enables me to speak about the village where my wife and I live. It has a lively and caring population, a real community, which dates back to the 12th century.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate because the subject is dear to my and many other people's hearts. In particular, I would like to speak about an event of a horrifying nature in 1994—the genocide in Rwanda. I declare an interest as the patron of SURF, a charity that was set up in 1997 to aid and assist survivors—widows, women, children and families—of the Rwandan genocide. In 1994, in only 100 days, more than 1 million people were slaughtered.

In all adversity there are heroes, and I would like to talk about some of them. My first is Fergal Keane, the well known TV journalist and fellow patron of SURF. He was a prime mover in letting the world know of the genocide, risking his life and continuing to tell the story since. He is a hero because it takes both physical and moral courage to do something of that nature. It is a role, of course, that is still being played courageously even today by many other journalists throughout the world.

My second hero is Mary Blewitt, who set up and runs the charity SURF. Supported by many good people, she is an inspiration and a survivor herself. I know that she would want me to refer to many others who work heroically for this cause, but mostly she would say—and I agree—that there are other heroes, those who survived and to this day struggle to cope and recover. The work of SURF includes practical aid, while a big aim is to establish a resource and testimony centre to provide an archive and a sanctuary for survivors in Rwanda. Work goes on to respect the dead. Over the past year, 22 mass graves have been built and a further 23 are planned for 2006 so that people can pay their respects.

Speaking of heroes, there are many testimonies, and I shall refer to just one, that of a young girl called Valentina, who was 11 years old when the events took place. As she said, she came from a, "happy family who did not want for anything".

But on 12 April 1994, killers entered the church where they had taken refuge, killing her family for no reason.

Finally I want to speak of another hero, Lieutenant-General Romeo Dallaire, the general in charge of the UN force entrusted to stop the killing. He was not given the troops he needed and his warnings were not heeded during the run-up to the genocide. The killing could have been stopped and the general strove heroically. But because of lack of support and troops, we see a record of United Nations failure and the moral cowardice of many, allowing the genocide to take place.

What is my reason for mentioning this today? I make a plea once again that the genocide in Rwanda must not be forgotten. We have natural tragedies in this world which are usually unstoppable, but we must renew our efforts to stop human killing human. I should like to end with some words from Lieutenant-General Dallaire:

"In Rwanda I shook hands with the devil".

But in his remarkable testimony, he says that he still believes in good in the world. I know that in this House great efforts are made to address these issues. Please may we carry on doing so. As the general said:

"Sometimes humanity is called into question, but we have a duty to value all lives equally".

He has expressed the hope that this century should become the century of humanity. We as humans need to rise above race, creed, colour, religion and national self-interest. I thank noble Lords for ensuring that today we are doing a little something to help to achieve that aim, but the international community still has a long way to go.

As well, many widows have recently been targeted for giving evidence against perpetrators of the genocide at *gacaca* (village court) trials. The perpetrators have given amnesty in the name of national reconciliation, but no measures have been taken to provide protection to survivors. As widows die from AIDS related illnesses, or through retribution, their testimony is lost forever

SURF Founder and Director Mary Kayitesi Blewitt will speak on these issues at the International Widows' Conference organised by The Loomba Trust and Chaired by Cherie Booth QC at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London on 23rd June. She will call on delegates to act now to support widows of the genocide:

"Action that is needed is threefold. Funding to enable the remaining widows who were raped during the genocide and are now HIV positive to access treatment. Second, we need the international community to review the *gacaca* courts and the continued killing of survivors and to introduce a witness protection programme. Thirdly, a programme must be developed as a matter of urgency to collect and archive the testimonies of the widows before it is too late."

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