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By Fergal Keane

*'Complicity with Evil': The United Nations in the Age of Modern Genocide*

by Adam LeBor

Yale University Press £17.99

The title of Adam LeBor's new book on the United Nations comes from the pages of one of the most devastating international documents produced since the end of the Second World War.

It concerned the murder of around 800,000 people in a tiny central Africa nation over a three-month period in 1994 and it was written by the UN. This latter fact is surprising, given that the UN effectively accused itself of being 'complicit with evil' because of its failure to stop the Rwandan genocide.

I must declare a personal interest here. I was in Rwanda at that time and witnessed the failures and the bravery of the UN. The heroism at local level by individual soldiers surpassed anything I have seen anywhere else in the world; the failures at leadership level, but most notably on the Security Council, were shameful and catastrophic.

On this genocide and on the horrors of Bosnia and other latter-day conflicts, LeBor is unflinching in his analysis of the failings of the Security Council but also the Secretariat, the bureaucracy with the Secretary General at its head which is responsible for running the UN.

He does well also to highlight the extraordinary situation of countries whose human rights behaviour regularly violates the UN charter being given seats on the UN's human rights commission.

LeBor has clearly had good access to senior decision-makers as well as those given the unenviable task of implementing UN policy on the ground in troubled places. His greatest strength is that he avoids ranting polemic, making his judgments with care and always backing them up with evidence.

Caught as it is between the competing demands of its member states, most notably the permanent five on the Security Council (the UK, America, China, France and Russia), I doubt the UN can ever be the decisive force that LeBor would like to see. Just look at the mess of Darfur and the wrangling between China and Russia on one hand and the American, French and British on the other.

And we live now in an age in which the conduct of international relations has been changed utterly by the attacks of 9/11 and the wars that have followed in their wake. As one seasoned diplomat put it to me when I complained to him about the inaction over Darfur: 'All the oxygen is being used up by the war on terror. People are too preoccupied with their own battles to get sucked into some African war.'

Twelve years after Rwanda, that is where we are.

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