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Canadian Government Apologizes for Rwandan Genocide Inaction

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CBC News reports that **Governor General Michaëlle Jean**, “the first top-level Canadian official to visit Rwanda since the genocide,” has “apologized to Rwandan leaders for Canada’s ‘inaction’ during the 1994 genocide in the African country.” Jean’s statement, written with the Foreign Affairs Department, was completed after her visit to the **Gisozi Genocide Memorial Centre** in Kigali—a city in central Rwanda—where over 250,000 bodies are buried in a mass grave. She stated, “ ‘the world’s failure to respond adequately to the genocide is a failure in which Canada—as part of the international community—readily acknowledges its fair share of responsibility.’ ” Jean told reporters, “ ‘I think we could have made a difference. . . . I think we could have prevented the magnitude of the horror that brought genocide here.’ ” An estimated 800,000 to 1,000,000 Rwandans, “people of ethnic Tutsi origin and politically moderate members of Rwanda’s majority ethnic group, the Hutus, were systematically slaughtered by extremist Hutus between April and June of 1994.” The Gisozi Genocide Memorial Centre has displays that explain how, historically, Hutus and Tutsis lived peacefully side by side, virtually indistinguishable from each other,” but in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, “German and later Belgian colonial powers heightened and exploited the population’s ethnic differences for their own purposes, . . . and created alliances with one group or the other, driving them apart and triggering resentments and hatred.”

Discussion Questions:

- What is the purpose of an apology? What can an apology accomplish?
- Why do you think Governor General Michaëlle Jean apologized to Rwandan leaders? Who is the audience of the apology?
- Why might other leaders in Canada not have apologized in the past? Why might other Canadian officials not have visited Rwanda since the genocide?
- How important is an apology in this situation? What purpose does an apology serve?
- The Gisozi Genocide Memorial Centre has displays that explain how colonial powers “heightened and exploited the population’s ethnic differences” in Rwanda in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, “and created alliances with one group or the other, driving them apart and triggering resentments and hatred.” What can a study of the Rwandan genocide help us understand about human behavior? Can you think of other times in history when groups living peacefully side by side grew apart, whether due to internal or external influences? What can cause a community to split apart along racial, ethnic, religious, or cultural lines? How can a split community be reconciled and unified?