

Linda Melvern, investigative journalist, formerly at the Sunday Times and author of “A People Betrayed”

Jocelyn Coulon: Thank you very much, Mark, for this first presentation. In a panel, you’re doing so well. You should do it often. I mean that was great. I would like to invite now Linda Melvern to address us.

Linda Melvern: Thank you so much for inviting me to speak at a school of journalism. I’m an investigative journalist, and for 10 years, I have concentrated on the exact circumstances of the genocide in Rwanda. The events in Rwanda in ’94 were defined for our generation, the consequences of the failure to intervene in the face of mass murder, and there remains little doubt that what took place, the failure to predict it, to prevent it, and then to stop it is one of the greatest scandals of the last century.

One of the great sadnesses is that it is an enormous failure of the profession of journalism. First in failing to adequately report what was happening, and the first international inquiry into the genocide determined that this contributed to what happened, and I do think the time has come to seriously question our news values.

Initially, what western press coverage there was on Rwanda, instead of identifying the killing as the result of a planned and well-organized campaign, described tribal blood letting that foreigners were powerless to prevent. This was dangerous. It bolsters the arguments that only a massive and dramatic intervention would succeed, and this was out of the question. The crucial issue of providing Dallaire’s beleaguered force with either supplies or reinforcements to continue to try to save people was simply not taken up as an issue. No one knew what the choices were, or the risks, because the Security Council meetings to decide UN policy were held in secret.

On April 28, the Oxfam Agency determined that a genocide was taking place in Rwanda, and issued a press release. That story merited 10 paragraphs on an inside page of The Guardian. An editorial some days later declared, “there is precious little that the international community can do to stem the fighting in Rwanda at this stage.”

In April, the journalist, Aidan Hartley was sent to Rwanda by the Reuters News Agency from Nairobi to cover the evacuation of foreigners, and he remembers being told by his editors that this is your classic “bongo” story. There would be no interest in what was happening in Rwanda unless they start raping white nuns. Hartley was told that his job was to cover the whites, and get the nuns evacuated, and that would be the end of it. Everyone knew that small wars in small states in Africa were less likely than ever to get coverage after what happened in Somalia. The message then was quite clear to the genocidaires.

I was in New York in April, 1994. I had written a 50-year history of the UN that was being filmed by Channel 4 television, and in early May, I conducted an interview that I have never forgotten, and it is with me still. I interviewed one of the non-permanent representatives on the Security Council for the Czech Republic. His name was Karel

Kovanda, and he said to me that he learned more about what was happening in Rwanda from human rights groups, from particularly Alison Des Forges, than from sitting in the secret and informal meetings of the Security Council to decide what to do. Eventually, a contact at the UN leaked to me an account of what had been said in these secret Council meetings, and this extraordinary document, which is now lodged in an archive at the University of Wales, proves that in the first three weeks of mass slaughter that fact was not discussed in the Security Council. The whole focus was civil war, and what to do about evacuating the peacekeepers.

You will now hear the U.S., Madeline Albright's memoirs, and the U.K., our own ambassador, claim that they did not know what was happening. This I have disproved in my latest book.

While the UN in an extraordinary and unprecedented move, opened its archives to me, the U.K, and the U.S., and France still, their policies are hidden in secrecy. It is incredible to me that the French ambassador, from a country intimately involved in an extremist government that plotted, and then carried out a genocide, sat in silence. I have a document in my archives that shows how French military officers were embedded in the Rwandan army.

The last chapter in my book I call "The Silence." The obligation of states towards genocide prevention is outlined in the 1948 convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, a legally binding treaty. As permanent members of the UN Security Council, the U.K., the U.S., could have taken action in accordance with the convention. They chose not to do so. They undermined international law of Rwanda, and made a mockery of the convention. I will say this to you as journalists. I have worked for 10 years on this story, and there is a ton of material that we still need. We still need to know how the policies were made in France and the U.K. and in the U.S., and we're a long way from that even today. Thank you.