

A Reply to Linda Melvern
By Fergal Keane
The Observer

Linda Melvern has been one of the foremost investigators to emerge in the aftermath of the genocide and I respect her work enormously. But her critique of the film *Shooting Dogs* makes a number of inaccurate statements about BBC News and Rwanda. The impression she conveys is of journalistic abandonment. This is unfair to several brave BBC correspondents. From the very beginning BBC carried reports of the slaughter from Lindsey Hilsum, in Rwanda on attachment with UNICEF when the killing started. The BBC's East Africa correspondent Mark Doyle arrived in Rwanda on 8 April – just after the major killings began. He was to remain for most of the one hundred days of the genocide reporting for all the BBC outlets including *Today* and the *Nine O'Clock* news. Nairobi-based correspondent Roger Hearing and cameraman Bas Solanki entered Rwanda by road – a perilous journey – and arrived in Kigali on 12 April, five days after the killing began.

Linda Melvern also writes: 'nor did BBC news broadcasts tell the world a genocide was underway'. But on 14 April Mark Doyle reported: 'Before the rebels came to Kigali a few days ago, what appears to have been a deliberate plan by Hutu militias to massacre Tutsis or rebel supporters was instigated - thousands were executed by bullet or by knife'. Nothing ambiguous there: a 'deliberate plan' to massacre Tutsis. Melvern is right that the BBC did not use the word 'genocide' at that point but then neither did General Romeo Dallaire, the man to whom reporters like Doyle were turning for information and guidance.

I don't argue with her general comments on the tone of much media coverage out of Rwanda in the early days. I also share her view that the news desks of the major broadsheets and the television organisations, including the BBC, should have given the story a higher priority. But I would ask Linda Melvern to accept that Doyle and Hilsum, for the BBC, were among a brave group of correspondents who told Rwanda as it was. One thing Melvern avoids mentioning, possibly, in fairness, because she was not there, was the degree of danger involved in trying to provide any coverage of what was unfolding. I arrived in late May, 1994. It was still a perilously dangerous and traumatising place. A week before my BBC colleagues Geoff Spink and Andy Kershaw were caught in a landmine attack and hunted through the bush by members of the Interahamwe. They were lucky to escape with their lives. It simply is not possible to convey the atmosphere of terror for those of us who went to Rwanda and tried to cover the genocide.

For some of us it has left an enduring mark, a sense that we failed, not so much as journalists, but as human beings, because we saw things which were terrible but which we were powerless to stop.

Linda Melvern did not have to confront those realities. I am glad for her.

- Fergal Keane

Fergal Keane is the author of *Season of Blood: A Rwandan Journey*
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