

Comment

## History? This film is fiction

A new BBC film telling the 'truth' of events in Rwanda only compounds the original sins of the West's media

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**Sunday March 19, 2006**

**[The Observer](#)**

In the course of a few terrible months in 1994, up to one million people were killed in Rwanda in organised and systematic massacres. It was slaughter on a scale not seen since the Nazi extermination programme. The comparison with the Holocaust is impossible to resist, for the central purpose was the elimination of a people. Every Tutsi was targeted. The failure of the Security Council of the UN to act responsibly is one of the great scandals of the 20th century.

The failure extends to the Western media, including the BBC; inadequate reporting contributed to indifference and inaction. It was not a glorious moment for BBC news.

Yet, due for release next week, is a BBC-financed film about the genocide, *Shooting Dogs*, starring John Hurt as a brave British priest. The film is billed as an 'authentic recreation', shot on location with Rwandan extras playing the roles of the Interahamwe militia. The film is said to be based on the 'true story' and 'real events' that took place in the first days of the killing. The story centres on a massacre at a school, the Ecole Technique Officielle (ETO), where Belgian peacekeepers abandoned thousands of people, ordered by the Belgian government to help, instead, with the frenzied evacuation of all expatriates.

A BBC journalist is present at the school and challenges the peacekeepers as they leave, using the word genocide to describe what is happening.

But this is fiction. There was no BBC film crew at ETO. There were no BBC film crews in Rwanda in those crucial early weeks. Nor did BBC news broadcasts tell the world a genocide was underway. In April 1994, as the massacre took place, the BBC was reporting the evacuation of expats and the renewed civil war between 'tribal factions'. *Shooting Dogs* shows a shocking disregard for the historical record. It was not until 29 April that the word genocide was used by the BBC. The press was no better. Later, the first international inquiry into the genocide was to conclude that the Western media's failure to describe the genocide underway in Rwanda had contributed to the crime itself. It was left to NGOs, notably Oxfam and Amnesty International, to draw attention to the terrible events.

A scene from *Shooting Dogs*

And while the school scene portrays the BBC journalist as heroic and the peacekeepers as brutish and uncaring, the film omits any reference at all to the later bravery of volunteer peacekeepers who did save lives in Rwanda. And while blaming 'the UN' for the failure in Rwanda, *Shooting Dogs* shows UN peacekeepers awash with ammunition and weapons. The very opposite

was true. As the force commander, Lt General Roméo Dallaire, cabled UN headquarters: 'The ineffective reaction to meeting the critical needs of this mission is nothing less than scandalous from the word go and even bordering on the irresponsible...this has directly led to the loss of many more Rwandan lives, to the casualties among our troops.'

Dallaire still believes that with greater public awareness there may have been some attempt to help Rwanda. Inadequate press coverage bolstered arguments that only a massive intervention would succeed. Dallaire's estimate that just 5,000 trained and mobile reinforcements could have contained the genocide went unreported.

The depiction of the massacre at Eto upon which Shooting Dogs is based is misleading. It was not a screaming and rampaging mob of machete-wielding youths who killed those sheltering at the school. It was far more chilling. After the Belgians withdrew, the 2,000 people were herded on a death march, an operation co-ordinated by senior officers of the Rwandan military, soldiers trained at European military academies. Among them were the conspirators of the genocide, officers who, for three years, had been plotting the slaughter. The conspiracy involved Rwanda's political, military and administrative leadership. Their aim had been to create a 'pure Hutu state'.

The victims of the EtO massacre were killed in a gravel pit by the Presidential Guard, who sealed the exits, allowing the militia to use their machetes in order to save on ammunition. Such co-ordination would become commonplace, the deadly co-operation of military and militia speeding the killing. The majority of the estimated one million victims in Rwanda were murdered in the first five weeks.

One of the few survivors of the Eto massacre, Venuste Karasira, said they all knew they would be killed. He gave me his story: 'I would like that the whole world thinks about [this tragedy] so that this coming century the whole international community takes enough strategy to stop such a tragedy in centuries to come.'

This is the fourth feature film based on the Rwandan genocide: there is no doubting the genuine and intense feeling of the film-makers, nor that they will generate a keener awareness of the brutal truth of the genocide. But because of this, they have a heavy responsibility to tell the truth.

Last year, there was a special showing of Hotel Rwanda in the Hague. In the audience was a Polish officer, Major Stefan Stec, one of the volunteer peacekeepers in Lt Gen Roméo Dallaire's force. After the film, which also portrays the peacekeepers as ineffectual, there was a panel discussion during which Stec was publicly blamed for not having done enough to save Rwandan lives.

Yet it had been Stec, grenade in hand, who had faced down the militia in the attempt in May to evacuate some of those trapped in the Hotel des Mille Collines. It had been Stec who read the names in a crowded lobby of those to be evacuated, but only those with the requisite visas to enter Belgium. There were just four Tunisian peacekeepers protecting people in this high-profile hotel. By the end of May, there were 91 similar sites all over Rwanda. There

were only enough peacekeepers to guard four of them.

Post-traumatic stress is a mysterious illness. Stec fell ill after the viewing of Hotel Rwanda. He stopped eating and in spite of help from psychiatrists who had treated soldiers from the Dutch battalion in Srebrenica, Stec died late last year. He feared that the wider public would never understand the truth of Rwanda and that Western politicians and diplomats would forever escape accountability for their decisions. For three months, they had played down the crisis, arguing that nothing could be done in Rwanda. Meanwhile, Stec and his colleagues had done all they could.

The international failure to predict the genocide - and there was a mass of evidence of its planning - the failure to prevent it and then to halt its progress merit the most precise documentation. To have created an inadequate peacekeeping mission that was suitable only for the most benign circumstances, and to leave it in place in an increasingly hostile environment, was a terrible error. It should be fully documented. Instead, the BBC has spent money on a fictional account of genocide, a film that takes our knowledge of this terrible crime no further forward at all.

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· Linda Melvern is the author of Conspiracy to Murder. The Rwandan Genocide (Verso). An updated and revised version will be published next month