

Genocide deniers must be stopped – British author Linda Melvern

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Melvorn : There are various forms of denial—you need to carefully look at what is being said because the deniers will use confusion and doubt. Denial is everywhere and I believe it has to be challenged.



British investigative journalist and author Linda Melvern speaks to this newspaper during the interview. File

Linda Melvern is a celebrated British journalist and author. She has written two books about the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda and has completed the third one, which is due for publication this year. She sat down with The New Times' Nasra Bishumba for some insights into her research in the atrocities and why fighting genocide ideology is everyone's responsibility. Below are excerpts :

Your history with Rwanda spans more than two decades, but where exactly does it begin?

In April 1994 in New York, I was finishing my third book on the history of the United Nations which was turning 50 the following year. When the Genocide against the Tutsi started, I recognised almost imme-

diately that this was the greatest UN failure of all time. It was profoundly shocking. So I started interviewing the ambassadors in the UN Security Council; particularly Ambassador Collin Keating (representing New Zealand). The Presidency of the Security Council rotated every month in alphabetical order so it was New Zealand's turn. The decisions about Rwanda were taken in secret and informal sessions. This is a paramount concern because when the founders created the UN, they determined that every government on the Council would have to justify its position in the court of world opinion. As a British citizen, I did not know what my ambassador was saying in the Council. I was very lucky because months later, someone leaked me a document that was an account of what was being said in these secret meetings and this is how we learned that on April 28 (1994), and it still seems extraordinary to me, that the Council held an eight-hour debate in secret on whether or not to call what was happening here a genocide when it was all quite clear and there was evidence this was a genocide against the Tutsi. I knew then, immediately, that I had to write about this and it has been 25 years.

25 years later, would you say that the UN is a better institution at dealing with such atrocities?

No. People talk about the lessons learnt from the Rwanda experience but no one has ever been able to detail what those lessons are. Amb. Collin Keating told me at the time that he thought what should happen was that every government that was on the Council at that time should hold an internal inquiry into why they took the decision that they did because it's a privilege and a special duty to be on the Council

and, of course, all governments failed. The genocide convention of 1948 is not a declaration, it's a treaty and those governments were bound by that treaty to prevent genocide and to punish it in the worst case scenario.

Do you think all of them owe Rwandans an apology ?

Absolutely. Only Belgium has apologised and held a Senate inquiry but they did not fully reveal the findings. The Belgians and all other governments continue to retain documents about this and continue to withhold information that we really need. On April 7, 1994, the 450 Belgian peacekeepers who were here were immediately put under the command of the Belgian Ministry of Defence. UN's Romain Dallaire no longer had control over them. I think that we must remember that it is the Belgians that withdrew the peacekeepers from ETO (Kicukiro). The order did not come from the UN, it came from the Belgium Ministry. Luc Marchal, who was the head of the Belgian contingent, has never fully explained how this happened. Everybody knew what was coming but they were looking out for their interests. It was quite clear what was coming. Ignorance is no excuse in this case.

Do you think that the media had the power to perhaps put a stop to this ?

The media could have done better. The first detailed inquiry by 18 governments determined that the press were a crucial failure. The first reporting, I can't even bare to say the words, described what was happening here as 'tribal anarchy' and chaos. It was dreadful reporting. There is an exception 'Liberation'. The reporter Jean Philippe Ceppi went to Gikondo on April where a massacre had happened early that morning and Philippe Gaillard from the International Committee of the Red Cross was there and told the journalist that what was happening was a genocide against the Tutsi and, given its speed, it will soon be over. 'Liberation' (in France) used the word genocide on April 11 and after that, the word simply disappeared from all the coverage. I thought that perhaps after that, journalists needed training about reporting crimes against humanity and the crime of genocide.

Do you think that the reporting could have been different if perhaps this was happening

elsewhere ?

Yes. Maybe it's perhaps because this was in Africa, that's why there were all the wrong assumptions, all the wrong prejudices and racism which I am deeply ashamed of.

It has happened in Europe, in the Balkans, and 70,000 peacekeepers were provided by the UN for the former Yugoslavia and we had only 2,500 here. At the time, the Security Council was really reinforcing the UN peacekeeping troops there, they were reducing them here. Keating said that the main focus at the time was on former Yugoslavia. I think that that the UN is institutionally racist in this regard.



Linda Melvern has written two books about the Genocide against the Tutsi and has completed the third one, which is due for publication this year. Net photo.

Do you think it is systematic and deliberate for people not to be able to take responsibility of their part in this ?

There are various forms of denial. You need to carefully look at what is being said because the deniers will use confusion and doubt. The top scale denial is that this was not planned, that this was a spontaneous uprising. Then we have the social denial that where some stories are profoundly shocking and insulting and I can only imagine the hurt and pain such material causes to survivors. Then there is something else. You cannot accuse a Head of State of shooting down a plane when you have no evidence. I doubt that they accuse any western leader of that crime unless they are absolutely sure, I think that one day the BBC should apologise because they have no evidence

at all other than a few Rwandan dissidents who get far too much airtime. So, yes, denial is everywhere and I believe it has to be challenged.

What do you think the world needs to do when it comes to the survivors?

To survivors, justice is also accountability. Those diplomats, officials and politicians who were crucial on this and the responsibility has simply slipped away. When former US President Bill Clinton came here, he said that there were many people around the world like him who were sitting in offices that were not aware of the terror that had overcome Rwandans. Well, he was the President of the United States. There are no people like him all over the world. He is responsible. The US ambassador in the Security Council at the time, Madeline Albright, is responsible. She has never been held to account. What did they know? What is in the US administration, through the documents, that can teach us? I think that the survivors deserve that. It is the least that they can do.

Tell us a little about what you make of the UN's refusal to transfer archives to Rwanda.

I have been calling for this for years. In 2000, what happened is that Human Rights Watch and other Non-Governmental Organisations came to Rwanda and took documents. They still have these original documents. It is completely unacceptable. These archives belong to Rwandans. Rwandans need to study these documents. This is what we call 'kicking the can down the road'. It means never confronting the real problem.

Let's talk a little about your first book. At what point did you decide that you were going to document the story of the Genocide against the Tutsi?

As soon as I got the leaked document from the Security Council. I said in my presentation at the conference (of April 4-5, 2019, on Genocide) that this was the greatest scandal in the last century and I still believe.

How long did it take you to write the book?

The book was finished in 1997 and I couldn't find a publisher. I had rejections from 23 major publishers in the UK. One of the publishers wrote me a letter that said, 'why buy a book on this when you can

get it on the television'. There were so many difficult moments and I wanted to shake people by the lapels and say 'don't you understand the gravity of this'.

How long after that did you get a publisher?

I finally got a publisher in 2000 but it doesn't mean that I stopped working. I carried on, I have done 25 years on this story. Some chapters have 90 or so references so obviously there is an enormous amount of documentation.

Have you had experiences where your books have been met with negativity?

Oh yes. I have received some pretty horrible emails. I ignore them. My husband is quite cross with me because I just delete them. I can't be bothered. I think that there is a refusal to talk about the fugitives. The majority who planned and organised this. I have an initial list of 240 architects of the Genocide. The majority of them are still out there. They have infiltrated everywhere and Hutu Power did not die, the ideology is still being promoted. What shocked me is the influence it has. The US Holocaust Memorium casts doubt on whether the Genocide (against the Tutsi) happened. How shocking is that!

Tell me about your medal (National Order of Outstanding Friendship from Rwanda); the back story.

I was absolutely astonished. I had a telephone call from Louise Mushikiwabo. It was quite late and my husband passed me the phone and said it is Louise. I was like, the Foreign Affairs Minister of Rwanda is calling me? She then told me and I burst into tears. I was so thrilled, especially the day I received it. The citation was very beautiful. It said thank you from a grateful nation and I was very moved. It is still very emotional.

Has writing these books had an impact on you, say emotionally?

Yes, it does but, again, perhaps they have changed me in ways I don't know. That said, I am not a survivor. So the bulk of what happened here is being dealt with by survivors every day.

What do you have in the pipeline right now?

My first book was 'A People Betrayed', the second one is 'Conspiracy To Murder' and I have now finished my third book, it is called 'Intent To Deceive'. It comes out some time this year. Someone once

said that Rwanda is the fourth member of my family.
There is still more work to be done.