

Srebrenica, genocide denial and the responsibility to protect

Giles Oakley

London :Wednesday 23 May 2012

I agree with George Monbiot (My fight may be hopeless, but it is as necessary as ever, 22 May) that we cannot deny genocide if we care about justice and humanity, otherwise we will find ourselves in a "very dark place".

As a junior UN official during the Bosnian war I was frustrated at the lack of action to prevent the Srebrenica massacre, given internal reports in the lead-up about the impaling of pregnant women, forced displacement and executions. While we supported airlifts and co-ordinated aid from 24 countries, I wondered whether these countries would act more decisively to halt further atrocities.

In the wake of Srebrenica and Rwanda, the same countries committed to the "responsibility to protect" populations against genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity at the UN 2005 world summit. Yet in Syria recent blasts near UN observers add to the toll of more than 12,000 deaths since March 2011, and these states have certainly not exhausted all the means of prevention embraced at that summit.

As a human rights observer in the occupied Palestinian territories I witnessed the impact of a lack of rule of law in the face of violence carried out by extremist settlers confident of their impunity, and the ensuing sense of abandonment felt by Bedouin and herders in the South Hebron hills. They wonder too, and echo the Syrians' dismay: "We now know that help isn't coming" (Ourselves alone: Syrian rebels cling to bullets and hope, 22 May).

In Bosnia, Palestine and Syria, nations haven't been willing to take adequate measures to protect civilians, and international law, binding nations to support humanity, is being tossed aside. We can't let complacency creep in alongside dangerous academic interpretations of international law and legal rulings. That would make for a very dark place indeed.

Jane Backhurst *Human rights observer, Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme for Palestine and Israel, and Isis Europe*

- I have long admired George Monbiot for his courageous willingness to break ranks from those with whom he might be expected to identify, and I heartily applaud his latest salvo against those on the liberal-left who indefensibly remain in denial over the genocidal nature of attacks on Bosnian Muslims by Bosnian Serbs, as seen at Srebrenica in 1995. Monbiot perhaps underestimates how important it is that journalists like him speak out unflinchingly from a left perspective, just as the Observer's Nick Cohen did in a more polemical vein in his book, *What's Left? How Liberals Lost their Way*, in 2007.

Many on the left are ever ready to attack the statutorily impartial broadcasters for media bias of one kind or another, so it's worth reminding people of the often outstanding coverage of the 1990s Balkan wars by ITN, C4 News and the BBC, where Martin Bell spoke out eloquently in favour of a "journalism of engagement" in his attempts to alert the world to what was really going on.

At that time the left was never entirely of one mind, and not everyone should be painted in the same damning colours of denial and cover-up, for it should be remembered that there were always some lonely, independent-minded voices on the left speaking out, such as Michael Foot, who plunged his pension savings into a campaigning film about the conflict, which he got shown on the BBC.

