Chapter 29

Turning Darkness into Light: The Quest for Justice by Srebrenica’s Mothers

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Introduction

The pending closure of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) has raised many questions. It has opened up a path for discussing the legacy of the ICTY. It is clear that the Tribunal has played a significant part in bringing war criminals to justice and advancing the rule of law and human rights; but there is much more that needs to be done. It is our hope that the Tribunal will contribute to the prevention of genocide and restoration of peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This should be one of the most fundamental aims of the ICTY and the international community.

The 1992-1995 War

We must not forget what happened in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In fact, most war crimes in the 1992-1995 war were perpetrated on the soil of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The majority of war victims are from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country where, along with war crimes, rape, torture, crimes against humanity, and other gross human rights violations, genocide—most notably in Srebrenica—t may place. On a Richter scale of crimes, the genocide and its ferocity was unprecedented in recent European history. The war was, indeed, the first war in Europe since the end of the Second World War.

The Genocide in Srebrenica

The ICTY has unanimously affirmed that genocide was committed in Srebrenica in mid-July 1995. The Tribunal found that the goal of Serb forces was to bring about the physical annihilation of the Bosniak population. The Tribunal also stated that there was vast and compelling evidence that proved beyond reasonable doubt that the Serb militia engaged in Srebrenica had the necessary genocidal intent. The specific intent

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was to “ethnically cleanse” the area of Srebrenica, so that Serbs would attain dominance over it. Srebrenica was considered to be of immense strategic importance for Serbs.

Many desperate refugees initially fled to Srebrenica from surrounding areas in the hope that the United Nations would protect them. Srebrenica was an area guarded by Dutch troops and declared to be “safe” by the United Nations. The purpose of establishing such a “safe area” was to protect the lives of innocent civilians, and yet the worst crimes that humans could possibly perpetrate were, in fact, committed in Srebrenica.

Only women and children survived the massacre of Srebrenica. Thousands of men were marched into forests where they were executed systematically, at close range, with their hands tied behind their backs. Others were tortured, beaten, and forced into dozens of trucks and buses to be transported to other execution sites and concentration camps, never to be seen again.

The town of Srebrenica had been transformed into a refugee camp where more than 40,000 people desperately sought refuge from the Serb military onslaught. We had no real food, electricity, or access to water, and lived in appalling conditions crammed together in small, overcrowded spaces. Meanwhile, the attacks by the Serb army became more vicious from day to day. It was apparent that not many of us would survive. Those who tried to flee the enclave and reach territory controlled by Bosniaks were ambushed and shot. Many more were wounded.

People were dying of hunger and exhaustion on a daily basis. Each one of us was affected by death. Women were raped and subjected to horrific abuses, newborn babies were dying, people were killed when going to nearby streams to get water, and everything inside the enclave was bombed.

Medical supplies and other necessities were extremely scarce. We were completely defenseless at the hands of a powerful army of Chetniks. Three generations of Bosniak men and boys disappeared within a matter of a week in the cruelest manner. The United Nations did little to prevent this and failed to take any measures to protect Srebrenica against Serb attacks.

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**Why Prevention of Genocide Matters**

The international community has a moral obligation to react in situations of armed conflict. Noninterference policies weakened the response of the international community in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war from 1992 to 1995. This paralysis was most vividly apparent during the UN Security Council’s silent observation of the massacre in Srebrenica. The international community must be more vigilant in the future, so that genocide, cruel torture, and crimes against humanity—which constitute a direct affront to human dignity and the right to life—become misdeeds of the past, not just in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but worldwide.

We must preserve rather than destroy human life, no matter where future conflicts might take place. While this may be a monumental task that requires substantial effort on all levels, we must not shy away from this task. The right to life is the most fundamental and sacrosanct human right. Everybody has a right to life, regardless of