

## **VIEW FROM THE HAGUE**

### **THE TRUTH ALWAYS FINDS A WAY TO REVEAL ITSELF**

For almost nine years, the authorities of Republika Srpska denied the atrocities committed by the Bosnian Serb forces in Srebrenica in July 1995. The facts about the massacre of over 7,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys, known throughout the world were rejected by the RS authorities as propaganda and fabrication. But, as always, the truth cannot remain buried forever. It always comes out, no matter how deeply it was suppressed.

As described in last week's column, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) has devoted considerable time and resources to identifying the perpetrators of these horrendous crimes. Slowly, but surely, the truth emerged.

In terms of legal proceedings, it all began with Dražen Erdemović, a foot soldier who participated in one of the death squads operating in and around Srebrenica in July 1995 and who described to the court in detail what had happened. He also provided the prosecution with information about other sites where killings took place and mass graves in the area.

More information became available during the 98 days of the trial of General Radislav Krstić who was charged with genocide, violations of laws and customs of war and crimes against humanity for his participation in the Srebrenica massacres as the General-Major in the VRS and the commander of the Drina Corps. Though he denied being personally responsible for the killings, General Krstić never denied that the crimes took place. The 66 witnesses and 910 pieces of evidence presented by the Prosecution corroborated that fact.

However - none of this prevented the Government of Republika Srpska from issuing a disgraceful report on 3 September 2002 which stated a number of complete lies. Most prominently, the report asserted that the number of Bosniaks killed in and around the Srebrenica "safe-area" in July 1995 was slightly above 2,000 rather than the generally accepted number of 7,000 to 8,000. According to the report, "*...some 1,800 Bosniak soldiers are estimated to have been killed in clashes as they were trying to flee. About a hundred are likely to have died of exhaustion, while some 100 were killed by Serb forces out of revenge or unfamiliarity with international law in Srebrenica in July 1995*". Needless to say, the report triggered outrage and prompted a very strong and very negative response from the victims' groups and the international community, including the ICTY.

Still, despite these reactions from the RS, the truth continued to emerge - this time as told by some of the perpetrators themselves. Two of the individuals charged by the Tribunal for the crimes committed in Srebrenica - Momir Nikolić and Dragan Obrenović decided to confess. For the first time, the world heard about the details of what happened as described by those who participated in the planning of the crimes and then carried them out.

At the beginning of May 2003, Momir Nikolić, who was the Chief of Intelligence and Security of the Bratunac Brigade described in great detail the plan to ethnically cleanse the enclave of its Muslim population, by transporting all the women and children out of the area and killing all the men of a military age. He then described how the plan was implemented in July 1995. He went on to describe the plan to conceal the crime that was put in motion later that year when the Bosnian Serb forces dug up the initial mass graves and reburied the bodies in other, new ones.

Three weeks later, his story was corroborated and confirmed by another perpetrator - Dragan Obrenović who was the Deputy Commander of the Zvornik Brigade during the Srebrenica massacre. He also described in great detail how the crimes were planned and committed.

In December 2003, in accordance with the decision of the Human Rights Chamber in Sarajevo and under pressure from the international community, the Government of Republika Srpska finally established a *Commission to investigate the events that took place in and around Srebrenica from 10 to 19 July 1995*. The task of the Commission was to investigate the crimes that were committed and establish the number and, if possible, the identity of those killed, as well as the location of the mass graves in which they were buried. On 11 June 2004, the Commission issued a preliminary report, in which it determined unequivocally that the Bosnian Serb forces murdered several thousand Bosniaks in Srebrenica in July 1995 and then took measures to conceal the crime. The Commission also discovered 32 new mass graves, of which four are primary mass graves.

The RS Government Commission is continuing its work and the deadline for the final report has been extended from 17 July to 15 October of this year due to the substantial new information that is becoming available to it.

Exactly nine years have passed since the killings in Srebrenica and the wall of denial is finally crumbling. Hopefully, by this time next year, the victims will finally be able to rest in peace and the individuals who committed these horrible crimes will be brought to justice.

**Outreach Programme**

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