

WEAVING CENTER IN SREBRENICA BRINGS HOPE AND INCOME AS TENTH MASSACRE ANNIVERSARY APPROACHES

AdvocacyNet
News Bulletin 35, April 28, 2005

Washington, DC: On the eve of the tenth anniversary of the 1995 massacre at Srebrenica, Eastern Bosnia, several survivors have returned to their homes in the devastated town and started producing traditional carpets (kilims) at a small center run by [Bosfam](#), the Bosnian women's group. The carpets are to be sold over the Internet.

The Srebrenica center is an extension of Bosfam's work in the nearby town of Tuzla, where thousands of survivors have lived since being expelled from Srebrenica during the July 11, 1995 massacre. Bosfam is a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP).

Bosfam has used weaving as a way of providing comfort and income to traumatized refugee women since it was set up in 1994 by Beba Hadzic, a former school teacher in Srebrenica. Bosfam's workload expanded quickly in July 1995 after thousands of distraught women arrived in Tuzla following the massacre, which claimed the lives of over 7,000 men and boys over the age of 15.

By opening a center in Srebrenica, Bosfam hopes to contribute to the rebuilding of the town, which has been robbed of its pre-war vitality by the loss of its Muslim population and ten years of isolation. According to the UN, only 2,931 Muslims had returned to the municipality of Srebrenica by the end of 2004, out of a pre-war population of 27,572.

Widows find it particularly difficult to return because there is no economy, and they have few means of supporting themselves without men folk. Srebrenica is also intimidating for Muslim children. As of July 2004, there were only 20 Muslim students at the secondary school out of a student population of 630, and one Muslim teacher (among 55). There is concern that Srebrenica's young Muslims may forsake the town completely unless their needs are specifically addressed in reconstruction.

After ten years, massacre survivors still struggle with their loss. It helps them greatly to identify and reburial family members, but this is proceeding slowly. The International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) has identified 1,622 massacre victims, of whom 1,304 have been reburied in the cemetery at Potocari where the massacre occurred. Another 378 are to be reburied at a ceremony on July 11 and they will include relatives of several Bosfam weavers. But this will still leave over 5,000 victims unaccounted for.

The fact that the perpetrators remain at large adds to the anguish of survivors. The International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague has charged 13 individuals in connection with the Srebrenica massacre, but six are still at large. They include General Ratko Mladic, former head of the

Bosnian Serb Army, who personally directed the initial stages of the massacre, and Radovan Karadzic, former civilian head of the Bosnian Serbs.

All of this has discouraged the return of refugees to Srebrenica. In addition, many widows have built new lives in Tuzla. Even Bosfam has been given an incentive to retain a strong presence in Tuzla because its donors have provided the money to buy the Bosfam building outright.

In spite of this, many Bosfam members have tired of living in the Mihatovici refugee center in Tuzla, and several have put aside their fears and returned to Srebrenica. They include Magbula Divovic, who lost a husband, son, brother, and two sons-in-law in the 1995 massacre.

Mrs. Divovic is the creator of one of Bosfam's most popular carpet designs (which are all named after their weavers) and much respected by the others.

Bosfam's large network of over 300 members means that its weavers could have a significant impact on reconstruction, and in late 2004 The Advocacy Project sought funding from the Dutch Refugee Foundation (Stichting Vluchteling) for a small weaving center in Srebrenica. The Foundation had funded an earlier AP project to help Bosfam design a website, and provided 10,000 Euros.

This grant allowed Bosfam to purchase nine new looms and set up a makeshift center in a private house. About five women have come regularly to the center, where they receive training and companionship from Mrs. Divovic and two other skilled weavers, while another five weave from home. Encouragingly, they include two young women. Together, they have produced about 30 medium-sized carpets in Bosfam's trademark designs. The project is overseen by a Milica Janic, a former Serb refugee, underscoring Bosfam's commitment to inter-ethnic reconciliation.

In spite of this promising start Bosfam's ability to attract others back to Srebrenica depends on selling their carpets. With this in mind, AP and Bosfam are hoping to send a delegation of weavers to Europe and the United States during the run-up to the July 11 anniversary, to attend commemoration events and promote Bosfam's online market place.

The main obstacle to Bosfam's long-term sustainability is competition from cheaper carpets on the world market. Faced by this, AP and Bosfam are developing a marketing strategy that will play up the history and special needs of the Srebrenica weavers – much as the fair trade movement appeals for a “just price” for small agricultural producers. If successful, this might be useful to other human rights victims who produce goods.

The Advocacy Project has supported civil society in Srebrenica since July 2000, when Peter Lippman profiled the efforts of refugees to return to villages near the town. Since then, AP has helped Bosfam and the Forum of Srebrenica NGOs to design websites, raised over \$15,000 for the weavers, organized events in the US and sent two interns to work with Bosfam. AP will be sending another two interns to work at Bosfam and the Forum this summer.

- [Sponsor a weaver](#)

- To read a [series of diaries and newsletters](#) written in 1999/2000 by AP consultant Peter Lippman on the first return of refugees to the Srebrenica area.
- In 2003, Mr. Lippman returned to Srebrenica and wrote a [series of reports](#) on its rebuilding in the aftermath of the massacre.
- Read Iain Guest's [profiles](#) on the people of Srebrenica (2004).
- Read the [blogs](#) of Bosfam's AP intern Marta Schaaf (2003).
- Read the [blogs](#) of Bosfam's AP intern Pia Schneider (2004).
- See [photos](#) of the reburial of massacre victims, September 2003.
- Watch an excerpt of the AP film, [Weavers for Hope](#).