

SREBRENICA SURVIVORS BURY THEIR DEAD AND DEMAND JUSTICE

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AN ADVOCACY PROJECT COMMENTARY BY IAIN GUEST

Srebrenica, Bosnia: On March 31, I watched 600 Bosnians being buried in the field where they were rounded up eight years ago and taken off to be murdered in one of history's most notorious massacres. It was a sobering reminder that the wounds of war never really heal.

Srebrenica's story has been told many times. After resisting the Bosnian Serbs for more than three years, the Muslim pocket collapsed at the beginning of July, 1995. Several thousand people set out through the mountains in the direction of Tuzla, and many were killed on the way. The rest - some 25,000 people - streamed down the road to the village of Potocari, where the Dutch UN battalion had set up its headquarters in an old battery factory. They were separated into two groups by Bosnian Serbs. Women, old people, and children were bussed across the lines to Tuzla. The men and boys over the age of 15 were slaughtered over the next week. In total, at least 8,000 died.

A handful of eyewitnesses survived to tell their story, which ensured that the dreadful facts came out. But this is a mixed blessing for the relatives of those who were killed, because the accounts were so gruesome. I spoke to one mother on March 31 who goes to sleep thinking of her 15 year-old son having his throat cut by a burly Serb militiaman.

She will never know the facts, but her pain will have been eased by being able to bury her son, and this marks the significance of the recent burial ceremony. That it took place at all is largely due to the International Commission on Missing Persons, a body that was set up by the 1996 G-7 Summit at the urging of former US President Bill Clinton. Using advanced DNA testing, the Commission's scientists have tentatively identified 1,240 victims from Srebrenica. 616 cases have been closed, and 600 of them were laid to rest at the recent ceremony. All but one - 24 year-old Hasima Spiodic - were male.

The burial brought relief for their families, but also a deep and inconsolable grief. The coffins were laid out in long rows beside the graves. After locating the grave of their loved one on a large map (which is fingered with the same reverence one sees at the Vietnam Memorial) the relatives went to the graveside, and crouched down to collect their thoughts. Some gently stroked the coffin. There were prayers and speeches. Then the families buried their dead in a frenzy of mass shovelling.

This was not just an event for women, even though mothers and wives have been most damaged by the massacre. Damir Cehic was 14 years old in 1995, which meant he was allowed to leave with his mother. If he had been born three months earlier, he would have suffered the fate of

Nezir Mujcinovic, 15, who was torn from his mother's arms and murdered. Death was capricious, as well as methodical, at Srebrenica.

How many more victims will be identified, and buried? Many, for sure, but it will also take years. Thousands of corpses were broken up when the Serbs dug up their victims and reburied them in remote areas. (Some have been found deep in Serbia, hundreds of miles from Srebrenica). Over 4,000 body parts from Srebrenica are stored by the Commission in body bags, and each one will have to be tested and then matched with blood samples. In addition, several more mass graves were recently found in the Serb Republic, containing hundreds of bodies. And this is just Srebrenica: a total of 40,000 Bosnians are still missing from the war.

The real problem is that identification is not enough. Like anyone who has lost a relative to violent crime, the women of Srebrenica are seeking justice. So far they have met with frustration. The Hague Tribunal has only issued 12 indictments in connection with Srebrenica.

Five of those indicted are now in custody in the Hague, and they include Nasir Oric, who was recently arrested by NATO troops in the town of Tuzla. Oric led the Muslim resistance in Srebrenica during the war and his arrest shows that the Tribunal is not biased against Serbs. But it will do nothing for Srebrenica's recovery. Not only is Oric considered a hero by many Muslims for his role in the war, but General Ratko Mladic, the former head of the Bosnian Serb Army and architect of the 1995 massacre, remains at large in Serbia or the Serb region of Bosnia.

Some of Mladic's former associates live openly in Srebrenica itself. This is particularly unnerving for the town's former Muslim inhabitants, and one reason why less than a thousand have returned home. For many, Srebrenica is fearsome and hostile.

Ironically, the massacre seems to weigh more heavily on the international conscience with each passing day. Governments have promised \$12 million in reconstruction aid, under a special program, and a \$5 million memorial is under construction at Potocari. Even the infamous former battery factory has been added to the memorial site.

But it will take more than money and hand-wringing to restore Srebrenica to its former vitality. Three things must happen before refugees return to this haunted valley. First, the international community must pursue Mladic with the same intensity that the US is now seeking Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Second, there will also have to be some sort of local accounting in Srebrenica itself, perhaps through a truth commission: at some stage, certainly, the facts will have to come out.

Third, the local government - namely the Bosnian Serb Republic - will have to accept responsibility for what happened here in 1995. So far the Serb authorities have shown no remorse. In September last year, they released a report suggesting that 2,000 Muslims died in July 1995, and that all were soldiers. They have refused to disclose the location of mass graves, and rejected requests to investigate suspects. This is like denying the Holocaust, and adds immeasurably to the anguish of the relatives.

None of the three conditions seems likely to be met soon. NATO has never shown any appetite for tracking down war criminals in the Serb areas of Bosnia, and the Hague Tribunal lost a staunch ally with the assassination of Serbia's Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic. On the positive side, the Serbian parliament has been energised by an investigation into Djindjic's death, which has uncovered unsavoury links between organised crime and war veterans. On April 14, the parliament repealed a law that had required war crimes suspects to be tried in a Serbian court. This opens the way for their direct extradition to the Hague.

But first these killers will have to be found, indicted and arrested. Until this happens, Srebrenica will remain as it has been for eight years - a town of ghosts and memories. The only difference will be an expensive memorial and an impressive graveyard at the site of the infamous massacre, which survivors will visit with a sense of dread and apprehension. This is not the way to recover from war.

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- View [photos](#) from the March 31 funeral ceremony.
- AP put out an [illustrated account](#) of the work of Srebrenica's NGOs in the rebuilding process.