

On the Record: Refugee Returns to Srebrenica

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New Burial; Questions on Blame

The other day I was in Srebrenica and I heard that Queen Noor of Jordan was going to visit. As I was making the rounds of organizations at the Dom Kulture, I noticed plenty of police and security guards around. In the afternoon she arrived, and passed a few feet from me with her entourage as I was standing in the hallway. She was going to one of the offices to meet with members of the groups of women survivors of Srebrenica.

With the women's groups, Queen Noor visited a mass grave being excavated near Vlasenica. She also stopped by the Potočari memorial center. Later the Queen issued a statement. She told the press that she believed that the revelations from mass graves will help lead to reconciliation among the people living in eastern Bosnia.

Preparations are under way for a new burial of identified victims at Potočari, to take place on July 11th, the eighth anniversary of the massacre. To date, 282 more remains have been identified, in addition to the 600 buried on March 31st. In fact, a total of 1,620 have been identified, but only somewhere around half of these remains are complete. Only when at least two thirds of a body is found is it allowed to be buried.

The rest of the exhumed bodies are waiting in 4,200 bags at centers in Visoko and Tuzla. It's not unusual for remains of one person to have been found in three different graves.

The youngest of these identified remains were a couple of fourteen-year olds. There were 26 minors, and a 75-year-old was also identified.

In mid-June, former president of Yugoslavia Zoran Lilić testified at the Hague trial of Slobodan Milošević. Milošević cross-examined Lilić, who testified that Milošević was "angry and shaken" upon hearing the news of the massacre. Lilić asserted that Milošević had nothing to do with the massacre and only learned about it afterwards.

Lilić said that he did not believe that the Yugoslav government had anything to do with the massacre. However, right around this time the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) came out with a revelation concerning this issue. The IWPR came into the possession of an official Bosnian Serb document that revealed that there were members of the Serbian (Yugoslav) police present in Bosnia at the time of the massacre. Tomislav Kovač, then chief of police in the Bosnian Serb Republic (Republika Srpska), filed an order to send these policemen to the Srebrenica area to participate in the operations that were taking place. The document was dated July 10th, 1995.

At the time, Milošević was president of Serbia, and thus under the Serbian constitution, responsible for the actions of Serbia's police force. If he was aware of their presence in Bosnia, this would strengthen the case against him for genocide. If he did not know, this evidence still supports the accusation of crimes against humanity.

A debate took place earlier this month in the Dutch Parliament about the role of the Dutch military in the fall of Srebrenica. Members of Parliament acknowledged responsibility, saying,

"The Netherlands is not guilty, but it is to blame. Despite good intentions it was not able to protect the enclave." Bert Bakker, head of the investigative committee, said this. He must be a lawyer.

Some MPs asked for a formal apology to the Srebrenicans. However, yesterday, Prime Minister Jan Balkenende stated that Bosnia should not expect an apology from the Dutch government for the massacre, as "an apology is associated with guilt," and it is Ratko Mladić and the Serb forces who are guilty of the massacre.

Economic Hardship Impeding Reconstruction

The Slovenian company "Citrus" announced that it would begin construction of a meat factory in Srebrenica towards the end of June. The factory's construction will cost around a half million dollars, and the company will then employ 20 people. This is just the kind of thing that Srebrenica desperately needs. Vice President of the Bosnian Federation Desnica Radivojević proclaimed that the opening of this factory would improve the climate for investment and thus ease the way for more returns to the municipality.

However, an article showed up in the Sarajevo paper calling Citrus the "worst violator of workers' rights in the Una-Sana Canton." This is the assertion of the Žitoprerada union, which took the opportunity of a visit by the Bosnian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights to Bihać to make a complaint about Citrus. Apparently, they've been remiss in paying their factory workers in that canton. Žitoprerada says that the company owes between 5 and 36 back payments to its workers, and has not been paying into a health coverage and pension fund for them.

This is what Bosnians mean when they use the phrase "rotten capitalism." Bosnia, and certainly Srebrenica, desperately needs foreign investment, and Slovenia is at the forefront of this kind of activity. But Srebrenicans certainly don't need to be subjected to the kind of treatment that the workers in Bihać are receiving from Citrus.

Recently, three of Srebrenica municipality's dozen-odd publicly-owned companies were put up for privatization. Only "Kamen" (Stone), a factory where quarried stone is turned into useful objects, was sold. A Serb named Dane Katanić bought the company and immediately sold the reserve stock and part of the equipment. He will convert the factory into a woodworking shop.

A few other companies in the municipality have been sold, all for prices considerably lower than their assessed value. All are working at a very reduced capacity, or not at all. The lead and zinc mine at Sase is waiting to be reactivated. Workers there have received only 16 monthly payments over the last four years. The mines are encumbered with obsolete and damaged equipment, and local experts are struggling to figure out a way to put them back in business.

Economic hardship is the last obstacle to the return and revitalization of Srebrenica. As one local commentator stated, if this problem is not solved, only the memorial center at Potočari will remain, because all the living will leave the municipality.

War Crimes Trials; Everyday Wear and Tear

The trial of Vidoje Blagojević and Dragan Jokić for crimes committed at Srebrenica is under way again. These are the two remaining defendants in a case at the Hague war crimes tribunal, after Momir Nikolić and Dragan Obrenović pleaded guilty in May. Blagojević, accused of participation in genocide, was commander of the Bratunac Brigade. Jokić, accused of murder and forced resettlement, was commander of an engineering unit in the Zvornik Brigade. The trial was delayed when Nikolić and Obrenović admitted their guilt, as this severely weakened the foundation of defense for the other two. It will be interesting to see how they will attempt to defend themselves.

In my intensive work with Srebrenica NGO activists, I have noticed a number of signs of wear and tear. It's hard to imagine constantly living under the conditions that confront them, and just continuing. Most of them are displaced persons, either Serbs living in Srebrenica, or Muslims in Tuzla. Many are threatened with eviction and have no money or support to move somewhere else. In other words, they are faced with the same problems of their constituency.

My colleagues have been interrupted regularly by one problem or another: snow piled up in the winter, broiling weather in the summer, bad cars, bad health, bad telephones, computer breakdowns, electrical blackouts, water cutoffs...the list of problems goes on and on, and it really affects people's moods. It reminds me that there was a war here, and as everyone says, commenting on Iraq, "It's much easier to start a war and destroy things than to fix them." In any case, people want to do these projects, but working with them requires patience.

Besides everything else, people are destitute. One colleague had to pay 1,000 KM just to have the power pole put in front of her house in Srebrenica, and then she had to come up with more money to pay for the hookup. She doesn't have gas in her car. She asked me how one may get to America. I don't have a useful answer to that. But I said to her that if people like her leave, there will be no Bosnia.

There are around 20 persons indicted for war crimes associated with the Bosnian war who are still on the run. Most of them are Bosnian Serbs -- the most notorious being Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić. Declarations by the international community that "the day of their arrests is getting nearer" are so regular that I have stopped paying attention to them. Only officials of the Hague tribunal seem sincere in their desire to see Mladić and Karadžić in The Hague, but they are powerless to effect an arrest.

In late May Carla Del Ponte, chief prosecutor for the war crimes tribunal, went to Belgrade to pressure for handover of indictees. Serbian Prime Minister declared that he didn't know where Ratko Mladić is hiding, but if he did, Mladić would be arrested immediately. A writer for the Sarajevo daily *Oslobodjenje* commented, "Let the taxi drivers of Sarajevo handle this and they'll have them in The Hague in two days."

In mid-June Željko Meakić, wartime commander of Omarska concentration camp near Prijedor, was arrested in Serbia. This strikes a personal note for me, as he oppressed people I knew from Kozarac and Sanski Most who were held at Omarska. Meakić was seen around Prijedor for years

after the end of the war, until the heat was turned up. During that time, a couple of women who had been held at Omarska went to The Hague to testify. They sent him a post card reading, "Wish you were here." Now he's there.

A little before the handover of Meakić, Serb police arrested Veselin Šljivančanin, the last of the three soldiers accused of the notorious murder at Vukovar of several hundred Croats in 1991. Serbian police besieged his apartment for ten hours and battled Šljivančanin's supporters, numbering at least 1,000. In the end, around 50 policemen and 7 civilians were injured. Police finished the drama by battering down Šljivančanin's steel door. He then gave himself up peacefully.

Afterwards, a prominent member of the Serbian Parliament asserted that Serbia had no more obligations to the war crimes tribunal, now that Šljivančanin was jailed. However, tribunal spokesperson Florence Hartmann insists that Mladić is still in Serbia.

Meanwhile, posters glorifying Radovan Karadžić continue to appear regularly in Banja Luka, Bijeljina, and Trebinje, with the caption, "Is it really a crime to defend one's people?"