



(L) An explosion followed by a huge fire rages in the south-west part of Pristina (Kosovo) in the early hours of March 25, 1999 after NATO launched a missile attack against Yugoslavia. (R) People carry a coffin during a mass funeral in the village of Hambarine, near Prijedor, Bosnia and Herzegovina, July 20, 2019.



PHOTO: REUTERS

# The different intrigues and agendas tied to the Srebrenica Massacre

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This year marked a quarter of a century since the Srebrenica Massacre of July 11, 1995, when around 8,000 Muslim men and boys were allegedly massacred by Bosnian Serbs—during the Bosnian War—in what has been described by some as the “worst war crime” to have taken place on European soil “since World War II”. The killings were suspected to have been perpetrated by units of the Bosnian Serb Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) under the command of Ratko Mladic with the involvement of a paramilitary group from Serbia known as the Scorpions.

Of course, we here in Bangladesh are no strangers to genocide, having witnessed our share of it during the Liberation War of 1971. According to Bangladeshi authorities, as many as three million people were killed by the Pakistani Army. Unfortunately, as the country was busy rebuilding itself from the devastation left behind by the Pak Army in the immediate aftermath of the war, Bangladesh was unable to pursue the genocide case in the UN with much effort and hence, the genocide in Bangladesh, which was much worse than the one that was perpetrated in Srebrenica, never got the kind of attention at the UN that it deserved.

Nevertheless, the Bosnian War lasted for a much longer time—raging on from 1992 to 1995—and saw

Catholic Croats (17 percent)—passed a referendum for independence on February 29, 1992. Following the declaration of independence, Bosnian Serbs, led by Radovan Karadzic and supported by the Serbian government of Slobodan Milosevic and the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA), mobilised their forces inside Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to secure ethnic Serb territory. It was after this that the war started.

Throughout the first year of hostility, Srebrenica saw heavy fighting and the town at the centre of the municipality had to endure Serb military and artillery assaults. From late 1992 to January 1993, Bosniak forces under the command of Naser Oric launched military incursions into Serb villages around Srebrenica, resulting in the murder of Serb civilians and soldiers. Although the number of casualties have been subjects of controversy, these raids, according to some, is what motivated the massacre of Srebrenica.

In April 1993 the United Nations had declared the enclave of Srebrenica which was under siege by the Serbs, a safe area under UN protection. However, the UN failed to both demilitarise the army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina within Srebrenica and force the withdrawal of the VRS surrounding Srebrenica.

When Serbian attackers overran



Bosnian Serb wartime general Ratko Mladic appears in court at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague, Netherlands, November 22, 2017.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Sadly, to this day, neither the ad-hoc court established by the UN to prosecute war crimes in the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), nor anyone else, have been able to determine conclusively just how many people were actually killed in and around Srebrenica in July 1995—or even under what circumstances. However, many questions have been raised in recent years in regards to the alleged massacre, the role of different parties, as well as the agendas that drove and motivated their actions.

The number 8,000 originated from the International Committee of the Red Cross’s (ICRC) estimate of 3,000 people being allegedly detained by Bosnian Serbs, along with another 5,000 it believed had attempted to “flee Srebrenica”. Initially the ICRC said it was unable to verify what had happened to them. But in a later statement that is rarely mentioned, the Red Cross said that “some [of the 5,000] had already reached central Bosnia”.

On the other hand, the ICRC’s estimate that Bosnian Serbs had detained 3,000 people from Srebrenica was based on Angelo Gnaedinger’s—the ICRC’s head of operations for Western Europe—visit to Pale and Belgrade in early September of 1995 and the gathering of information from witnesses. These witnesses were the United Nations Dutch Blue Helmet Protection Force stationed in Srebrenica, who earlier had told journalists a completely different figure after being evacuated from the area.

The *New York Times* for example reported: “Dutch peacekeeping troops evacuated from Srebrenica... say that Bosnian Serbian invaders... abducted between 150-300 men aged 16-60” (July 24, 1995). After the Red Cross’s statement on 3,000 people being detained, the *New York Times* contradictorily stated: “About 8,000 Muslims are missing from Srebrenica... Among the missing were 3,000, mostly men, who were seen being arrested by Serbs... In addition to those arrested, about 5,000 ‘have simply disappeared.’”

The report never mentioned the Red Cross’s statement that “some” of the 5,000 had already “reached central Bosnia”. Nor that journalist Chris Hedges (who later won the Pulitzer Prize) had previously reported that: “Some 3,000 to 4,000 Bosnian Muslims who were considered by UN officials to be missing after the fall of Srebrenica have

made their way through enemy lines to Bosnian government territory” (*New York Times*, July 18, 1995).

Similar to Hedges, the *Times of London* also reported that: “Thousands of the ‘missing’ Bosnian Muslim soldiers from Srebrenica who have been at the centre of reports of possible mass executions by the Serbs, are believed to be safe to the northeast of Tuzla” (August 2, 1995). And professor Milivoje Ivanisevic at the University of Belgrade, having compared the Red Cross’ list with the Bosnian electoral lists for the 1996 fall elections, claims to have found 3,016 people named as “missing” by the Red Cross on the electoral lists (“Faux electeurs...ou faux cadavres”, October 1996).

However, as far as summary executions were concerned, people like Lieutenant General Hans Couzy, the commander-in chief of Dutch ground forces, have documented how Bosnian Serbs had executed unarmed Muslim men by shooting them in the back of the head. And there is no doubt that many other war crimes were committed during the Bosnian War. But it is important to ask how many died during the evacuation of Srebrenica, how many managed to safely reach Bosnian Muslim territory, and when, according to former UN Military Observer Carlos Martino Branco—who was on the ground in Bosnia during the war and, in particular, during the fall of Srebrenica.

In his detailed account published in 1998, Major Branco wrote: “In mid 1995, the prolongation of the war had dampened public interest [in the west]...An incident of this importance would nonetheless provide hot news material...and incite new passions.” The “western media exacerbated” the situation, which Bosnian politician Alija Izetbegovic “was quick to explore”. Years later, French politician and Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General in Kosovo (1999-2001), Bernard Kouchner, asked a dying Izetbegovic about the Bosnian Serb concentration camps, whereupon Izetbegovic answered that the claims had been inflated with the aim of getting NATO to bomb the Serbs (*Les Guerriers de la Paix*, 2004).

Former president of the (Muslim) Social Democratic Party in Srebrenica, Hakija Meholic, during an interview with a Muslim journal, made another shocking revelation when he said that in

September 1993, while he was a member of Srebrenica’s delegation to his party’s congress in Sarajevo, Izetbegovic had taken the delegation aside in confidence and said: “You know, I was offered by [US President Bill] Clinton in April 1993...that [if] the Chetnik forces enter Srebrenica, carry out a slaughter of 5,000 Muslims...there will be a [NATO-US] military intervention” (“5,000 Muslim Lives for Military Intervention”, *Dani*, June 22, 1998). According to Meholic, the Srebrenica delegates had turned down the offer. But in the grand scheme of things, the Srebrenica massacre played a significant role in letting NATO break out of its post-war “collective defence” area of operations (limited to the defence of the territories of its member nations) to become a globally



Bosnian Serb wartime leader Radovan Karadzic in the Hague. PHOTO: AFP

operating alliance—through NATO’s bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 during the Kosovo War based on “humanitarian reasons” (which was a precursor to the humanitarian wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, etc).

In September 1996, former UN official Cedric Thornberry wrote that he was warned at the UN headquarters back in the spring of 1993 to “take cover” because “the fix is on” (“Saving the War Crimes Tribunal, Bosnia Herzegovina”, *Foreign Policy*). And also that, “prominently in parts of the international liberal media” the position is “that the Serbs were the only villains”. As a result, Serb misbehaviour was routinely presented by the western media, who omitted similar atrocities when they were committed by other parties to the conflict—an example being the attention given to Bosnian Serb prison camps like Omarska, which the media focused on with indignation, even though the Muslims and Croats had very similar prison camps at Celebici, Tarcin, Livno, Bradina, Odzak, etc. (*Fool’s Crusade*, Diana Johnstone).

Though this record of systematic omission does not disprove the truth of the standard narrative on the Srebrenica massacre, it does suggest the need for a closer look which the mainstream in the west has generally refused to provide. As well as remind us to be aware of the fact that even massacres are often tried to be spun by different factions to serve their own (geo)political agendas, and be suspicious of anyone willing to drop bombs for peace and start wars for humanitarianism.

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The Srebrenica Potocari Memorial.

PHOTO: AFP

many terrible atrocities which is the hallmark of nearly all wars. By 2008, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) had convicted 45 Serbs, 12 Croats and 4 Bosniaks of committing war crimes in connection with the war which resulted in the displacement of an estimated 2.2 million people and 100,000-200,000 deaths.

After Slovenia and Croatia seceded from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991, the multi-ethnic Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina—which was populated by mainly Muslim Bosniaks (44 percent), Orthodox Serbs (32.5 percent) and

Srebrenica on July 11 and took peacekeepers hostage, about 25,000 Bosniaks fled to the UN base at Potocari on the city’s outskirts. The United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), represented on the ground by a 400-strong contingent of Dutch peacekeepers, could not prevent the town’s capture by the VRS. And it was in its aftermath that the massacre is said to have taken place.

The ICTY spent years investigating the killings. And later declared that the Bosnian Serb forces had begun planning the genocide during the final stage of the three-year Bosnian War, in March 1995.