

## **Bosnian Serb Forced Into Atrocity Admission**

**Author:** [Gordana Katana](#)

International pressure appears to have prompted Republika Srpska's release of damning Srebrenica report.

Heavy political arm-twisting brought about last week's unprecedented admission by Republika Srpska, RS, that Bosnian Serb forces executed thousands of Bosnian Muslims after the fall of the UN-protected enclave of Srebrenica in July 1995, observers say.

The acknowledgment - after almost nine years of silence and cover-ups - came in a 42-page report from the special Bosnian Serb government commission tasked with investigating the atrocity.

The report uncovered locations of 32 previously undiscovered mass graves containing remains of Srebrenica victims, and presented detailed information on the participation of Bosnian Serb police and army units in the massacres.

But observers say that - rather than a true act of repentance - the dramatic disclosure was the result of heavy political arm-twisting that included threats of dismissing some senior Serb officials, introducing sanctions against and even the possible dissolution of the Bosnian Serb entity.

The special commission on Srebrenica was set up at the end of last year at the request of the Bosnian Human Rights Chamber - a state institution that examines citizens' complaints about human rights violations. The chamber responded to some 50 enquiries from relatives of men who went missing after the fall of Srebrenica, and tasked the commission with providing evidence about the fate of the disappeared.

But the commission's interim report, in April of this year, was little more than a collection of complaints about the obstruction placed before it by the Bosnian Serb defence and interior ministries

Bosnia's High Representative Lord Ashdown was reportedly furious at this news. He accused the RS ministries of "having done everything to cover up the greatest crime committed in Europe since the Second World War" and fired the Bosnian Serb army deputy chief of staff Cvjetko Savic and the head of the RS government secretariat for relations with the Hague tribunal, Dejan Miletic.

Further job losses were threatened unless a marked change in attitude was noted.

"It is shocking that you have to pull the truth out of them like a rotten tooth," Ashdown said at the time, warning that "until they release information on everything that happened in Srebrenica, RS will have no legitimacy despite the Dayton Agreement".

The new report took fewer than two months to produce.

Those sections which have been made public confirm that Bosnian Serb forces systematically murdered prisoners captured after the enclave was overrun, and later sought to cover up the crime by reburying their bodies.

The report acknowledged that the massacre was the final part of a three-stage plan called operation "Krivaja 95", which included the initial attack on Srebrenica, the separation of women and children from men and boys and finally the execution of the latter.

It also said that some smaller police units from Croatian Serb-held territory and Serbia were supposed to take part in the operations. But the commission claimed that "the analysis of the full documentation on the case does not produce reliable evidence of these units' participation" in Srebrenica.

Should the involvement of Belgrade-controlled units in the Srebrenica massacre be proven, it could have a major impact on Bosnia and Herzegovina's genocide lawsuit against Serbia and Montenegro before another Hague-based tribunal - the International Court of Justice.

Most of the information in the report is however not new - it has already been uncovered by the Hague tribunal's investigators and made public during the years of Srebrenica-connected trials there.

But its significance lies in the fact that it has been supported by the materials found in the Bosnian Serbs' official archives, the existence of which was, until now, being denied.

"The commission wrote the report based on the documentation of RS institutions and statements of witnesses in the field," commission president Milan Bogdanic said as he launched the report.

Bogdanic described the report as a "historical event" for RS and said the time had come for the Bosnian

Serbs to admit that some of their fellow Serbs had participated in war crimes.

International representatives and some parts of the Bosnian public commended the report as the first step towards a change in attitude toward war crimes in the RS.

But observers within the Bosnian Serb entity were sceptical.

Tanja Topic, political analyst with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Banja Luka, told IWPR that it was “frightening to see that the attitude towards the crime changed only because some senior officials were threatened with the loss of their jobs”.

Branko Todorovic, head of the RS Helsinki Committee for the Protection of Human Rights, agreed, “When you read the report carefully, you’ll see to what extent it was calculated to prevent the High Representative from dismissing public figures in RS.

“It is full of understatement both on the number of victims and on the issue of who was responsible for these dreadful crimes.”

Bosnian Serbs are still living in the shadow of what happened in Srebrenica, and analysts note that a large number of people implicated in the tragedy still hold senior posts in the police and army.

The two people deemed most responsible for planning the massacre – former RS president Radovan Karadzic and the ex-Bosnian Serb army chief Ratko Mladic – are still at large, despite the fact that the tribunal issued warrants for their arrest almost a decade ago.

And the Srebrenica report, regardless of its unprecedented openness, still falls short of naming Bosnian Serb army or police officers responsible for the Srebrenica massacre.

According to Milos Solaja, the director of the Banja Luka-based International Relations Institute, the fact that none of the incumbent RS officials, who propagated the policy that led to Srebrenica, resigned following the release of the report, indicates that it is “primarily aimed at protecting the political and personal status of the country’s officials”.

The RS ruling party, the Serbian Democratic Party, SDS, is the same party that implemented the war plans that eventually led to the atrocity.

At a press conference in Banja Luka, its spokesman Dusan Stojicic admitted that “one could find that there is a cause-and-effect connection” between the international pressure and the report.

Part of the pressure came from the fact that Bosnia is applying for the membership in the NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme at the organisation’s summit in Istanbul at the end of this month. Prosecuting war crimes and cooperating with the Hague tribunal are placed high on the list of conditions that the country needs to fulfill before being admitted.

Observers agree that despite recent suggestions by Hague chief prosecutor Carla del Ponte that Karadzic may be arrested by this deadline, the prospects of that happening appear to be zero. This, they claim, is the real reason why the RS leadership was eager to demonstrate its readiness to cooperate at least by releasing a decent report on Srebrenica – though this has done little to impress Ashdown.

“The report of the Srebrenica commission indicates certain progress, but [its] findings are no substitute for full cooperation with the Hague tribunal,” he said. “There’s much more that needs to be done to overcome the total inactivity of the RS authorities on the war crimes front.”

Nonetheless, respected Bosnian commentator Ivan Lovrenovic believes that the RS authorities’ admission is a very important one.

“Of course the RS did not set up the Srebrenica commission of its own free will. It was forced into doing this,” Lovrenovic told IWPR. But he said “it would be wrong to overlook this new potential energy for reconciliation.

“After all, aren’t all political breakthroughs of this kind, everywhere and always, motivated by necessity?”

Gordana Katana is a correspondent with Voice of America in Banja Luka.

**Location:** Serbia  
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