

Manjaca Survivors Call for Memorial

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Former camp inmates feel their experiences have been ignored.

Former prisoners plan to request a memorial centre at the site of the notorious Manjaca camp, amid concerns that officials are not doing enough to preserve the memory of the atrocities committed there.

At a ceremony to mark the seventeenth anniversary of the camp's closure, the chairman of the Camp Detainees' Association of Bosnia and Hercegovina said he was disgusted that no official representatives had showed up at the event.

"It was humiliating that no official government representative had the decency to come," Murat Tahirovic said. "We invited everyone: the presidency, the council of ministers, political parties, but they didn't even find the time to answer our inquiry. This just shows how Bosnia and Hercegovina officials have forgotten what happened in Manjaca in 1992."

Mirsad Tokaca, director of the Sarajevo-based Investigation and Documentation Centre, says he was not at all surprised that no politician attended the ceremony.

"This merely continues the authorities ignorance of the victims and what had happened in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995," he said.

However, Republika Srpska, RS, vice president Adil Osmanovic said that the lack of attendance had not been a deliberate snub by the authorities.

"I personally know that I could not attend the event for obligations I had arranged earlier," he said. "I believe that this is what happened to my colleagues, too."

More than 500 former inmates and their family members gathered on November 14 at Mount Manjaca in the Banja Luka area, to mark the seventeenth anniversary of the closing of the camp. A simple flower laying ceremony and short statements by three former inmates was to serve as a reminder that "Manjaca should never be repeated, anywhere".

"I have no words to describe what I've lived through," said Hamid Cirkic, a former detainee from the north-western municipality of Sanski. "For the average person, it is incomprehensible.

"Believe me, every time I visit Manjaca, I have flashbacks of those horrible images and my stomach turns."

On September 16, 1991, the Serbian Democratic Party, SDS, proclaimed a Serb autonomous entity in the Krajina region of north-western Bosnia.

A number of detention camps for Bosniaks and Croats were set up, the largest and most notorious ones being Manjaca in the Banja Luka area, and Trnopolje, Omarska and Keraterm in the Prijedor area.

Jasmin Odobasic, from the Bosnian missing persons institute, says that Croatian prisoners of war were held at the Manjaca camp from 1991, with civilian Bosnian Croats and Muslims joining them there in June 1992.

“The former army barracks at Manjaca - or rather a few barns belonging to the compound - were transformed by Serb authorities into a concentration camp,” he said.

“We were locked in six stables at Manjaca,” recalled Cirkic. “The most dreaded one was the horse stable number three, which we inmates referred to as the ‘white house’, and from where the horrid cries of newly-arrived people being tortured and beaten would come from.”

The camp, located on Mount Manjaca near the city of Banja Luka, has featured in several Hague tribunal indictments including those for Bosnian Serb politicians Momcilo Krajisnik and Biljana Plavsic, as well as in the trial of the late Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic, who was accused of masterminding attempts to ethnically cleanse non-Serbs from lands coveted by Belgrade. Milosevic died in 2006, a few weeks before his case was due to end.

The camp contained some 5,000 mostly male prisoners, aged between 18 and 60. It operated primarily in 1992, with the RS authorities maintaining that the men were prisoners-of-war who enjoyed proper treatment. However, the scope and brutality of the crimes committed at the camp were attested to not just by the tribunal, but also in the International Court of Justice judgement in the Bosnian genocide case.

The first group of prisoners left Manjaca under international public pressure in November 1992; the ICRC maintains that the last group of detainees were set free on December 18, 1992.

There are no exact data on how many deaths were caused by the crimes and mistreatment at Manjaca. However, the indictment against Milosevic charged him with the deaths of at least 37 individuals at the camp.

The ongoing trial of Mico Stanisic and Stojan Zupljanin at the Hague tribunal also includes charges of war crimes that occurred in 1992 at Manjaca.

Zupljanin, the former head of the regional security services centre in Banja Luka and adviser to the Bosnian Serb political leader Radovan Karadzic, who is on trial for genocide, is accused of the extermination, murder, persecution, and deportation of non-Serbs in north-western Bosnia between April and December, 1992.

His co-accused Stanisic, the former minister of the Bosnian Serb ministry of internal affairs in April 1992, is charged with murder, torture and cruel treatment of non-Serb civilians, as well as for his failure to prevent or punish crimes committed by his subordinates.

According to the indictment against Stanisic and Zupljanin, “between May and the end of December 1992, detainees at Manjaca camp were subjected to regular beatings in areas throughout the camp including outside the make-shift medical clinic, stables and other buildings.

“Beatings were inflicted by fists, feet, batons, wooden poles, rifle butts and electric cables. In some cases, the beatings were so severe as to result in permanent serious injury and deaths.”

Mirsad Tokaca, director of the Sarajevo-based Investigation and Documentation Centre, said that all places of suffering throughout Bosnia should be properly marked and commemorated.

“It is necessary to mark all places of suffering, not just Manjaca. It is something that should be done regardless of what ethnic or national group the victims came from. The primary criteria, in my view, for the marking of these places should be court verdicts, meaning those cases where it has been proven beyond doubt that crimes were committed there.”

Crimes at Manjaca camp have so far only been the subject of one verdict at a local court in Bosnia.

In 2006, the district court of Banja Luka found three former camp guards guilty and sentenced them to 36 years imprisonment for torture, abuse and murder.

Murat Tahirovic, of the Camp Detainees' Association, said the Manjaca commemoration was intended as “a warning sign to the judiciary, to remind them that a number of persons responsible for crimes in the camp have not yet been processed, but rather live as free citizens in Bosnia or the countries of the region.

“Even those who held responsibility at lower level must be sanctioned.”

Tahirovic said that the detainees were aware that it would not be easy to get the approval of RS authorities for the construction of a memorial at the site of the camp.

To underline what he perceived as a generally hostile atmosphere toward survivors in RS, he recalled an incident at last year’s commemoration, when an unknown person fired several sniper shots at his car. There have been other reports of attacks or abuse against visitors to memorial sites throughout RS territory.

“But nothing can stop us from seeking the memorial to be built. We are obliged to this by the evil that happened there. We are obliged to remind future generations to prevent this evil from happening,” Tahirovic said.

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