

New Calls for Dutch Srebrenica Inquiry

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Prominent writers in Holland claim Dutch peacekeepers could have done more to prevent the Srebrenica massacres

There have been renewed calls in the Netherlands for a parliamentary inquiry into the role of the Dutch United Nations Protection force in the fall of the Bosnian Muslim enclave of Srebrenica five years ago

After Bosnian Serb forces captured the UN protected enclave, they proceeded to round up and slaughter many of its inhabitants, in what is generally considered the worst atrocity in Europe since World War II.

The Dutch calls came as the international charity, Medecins Sans Frontiers, MSF, accused the French authorities of holding up an inquiry into France's involvement in the affair.

Dutch Environment Minister, Jan Pronk, backed demands from by 40 prominent authors and journalists for an investigation into the fall of the "safe haven" and the subsequent massacre of around 7,000 male inhabitants.

In an open letter to the government, coinciding with last week's fifth anniversary of the Srebrenica tragedy, the writers claimed the 150 lightly-armed Dutch battalion peacekeepers, Dutchbat, charged with protecting the enclave, could have prevented it from being overrun.

"Dutchbat failed to protect the inhabitants of Srebrenica and the many thousands of refugees in the UN safe area," the letter said. "The enclave fell, many thousands of people were murdered or are officially still missing - and Dutchbat made no attempt worth mentioning to save lives."

As the Bosnian troops advanced on the enclave, the Dutch soldiers initially put up some resistance but then withdrew. The UN and The Hague say the peacekeepers could not have foreseen what would happen after the fall of Srebrenica.

Pronk insisted though that there were still many unanswered questions over the Dutch role in the tragedy. "The government decided that we [Dutchbat] would withdraw in a responsible fashion as far as the Muslims were concerned," he was quoted as saying. "The main question is: how were we able to let our men withdraw given the responsibility they had."

The public in the Netherlands remain haunted by Srebrenica but many politicians appear to resent the way Dutch soldiers have been blamed for the tragedy. Only five out of 150 Dutch MPs attended the Srebrenica remembrance ceremony last week. Moreover, Prime Minister Wim Kok was quick point out that Pronk's criticism of Dutch soldiers before and after the tragedy was not representative of the government's position.

Since the Bosnian Serb capture of Srebrenica, the Dutch courts together with six independent commissions have ruled there was no grounds for prosecuting the Srebrenica peacekeepers.

But suspicions over the conduct of the soldiers have persisted over the years. These have in part been fuelled by allegations that they disposed of photographic and video evidence purporting to show them

helping Bosnian Serb troops rounding up Muslims after the enclave fell.

Over the years, there have been numerous calls in the Netherlands for a full inquiry into the Srebrenica tragedy. The Dutch government is awaiting the results of two reports into the affair before deciding on its next move.

An investigation by the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation will be published in May next year. Another by the Bakker parliamentary committee, named after its president, Social-Liberal MP, Bert Bakker, is to be made public in September.

Bakker committee hearings in May and June revealed that the Defence Ministry was divided over the Dutchbat mission. Those opposed to it thought the risks of sending such a small, lightly armed detachment of men were too high. Some of its supporters saw it as a means of avoiding defence cuts.

In their open letter to the government, the Dutch writers claim the Bakker hearings "made it all too obvious that the safe retreat of the Dutch soldiers was more important than the Dutchbat's primary task: the protection of citizens and refugees."

In France, the MSF has been pushing for a parliamentary inquiry to investigate the conduct of the French UN commander in Bosnia at the time of the Srebrenica tragedy, General Bernard Janvier.

MSF and other pressure groups want to know why Janvier did not call for NATO air-strikes as the Bosnian Serbs threatened to overrun the enclave.

At the time, several Frenchmen were among a group of 350 UN troops being held hostage by the attacking forces. MSF said Bosnian Serb leaders boasted of receiving guarantees that NATO planes would not strike without the authorisation of French President Jacques Chirac.

"Who told Janvier not to give the order [for air-strikes]? What arguments were put forward? Perhaps the relationship between Janvier and Chirac is what is blocking [an inquiry]," said the MSF president, Jean-Herve Bradol.

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Location: Bosnia and Herzegovina

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