

Regional Report: Dutch Srebrenica Probe

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The Netherlands failed at Srebrenica - but so did NATO, Dutch ministers tell parliamentary inquiry.

Dutch foreign affairs minister Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said last week that his forces had been let down by their NATO allies when Srebrenica was attacked by Serb forces in 1995.

Giving evidence at the parliamentary inquiry into the massacre at the Bosnian town, he defended the decision to surrender it, saying that the French UN commander had refused to give air support to the out-gunned Dutch garrison.

But he claimed British forces had behaved in the same fashion when they hurried out of another eastern Bosnian enclave, Zepa, that same year, and that the Dutch should not be blamed for waving the white flag. "I wonder what would have happened if there were French or British troops in Srebrenica," he told the parliamentary inquiry.

Srebrenica, a town surrounded by Bosnian Serb forces, was declared a UN Safe Area in 1993 and Dutch troops were moved in to garrison it. In July 1995, the town was overrun, with the Dutch surrendering after failing to get air support from NATO.

Soon afterwards, Bosnian Serb troops rounded up more than 7,000 Muslim men and boys and shot them.

In April this year, the entire Dutch cabinet resigned after an independent report commissioned by the government said The Netherlands was at fault.

This new inquiry, the most powerful instrument of the lower house of parliament, is meeting over two months to assess if there is any individual liability among the Dutch military and civilian staff at the time. Its conclusions could open the way for lawsuits to be brought against individuals by relatives of those who died in Srebrenica.

In 1993, Dutch military chiefs voiced doubts about the deployment, General Arie Van Vlis told the inquiry last week. "We went as a small country in the most difficult location. We overplayed our hand," he said.

But politicians said that the entire country wanted to get involved in doing something to ease the plight of Bosnia's civilians at the time. "It was a humanitarian imperative to do something," Scheffer said.

The inquiry heard how, when the safe area came under attack in early July 1995, the Dutch force - known as Dutchbat - waited in vain for NATO air support.

Dutchbat chief, Commander Thom Karremans, said he had promised the town's Muslim leaders that air strikes were on the way. He was convinced that air support was guaranteed under the terms in which the UN had agreed to defend the enclave, home to more than 20,000 Muslim refugees.

On July 9, French General Bernard Janvier, the UN force commander, ordered Dutchbat to form a "blocking

position" in the night at the southern edge of the town.

Karremans told the inquiry that he sent six white armoured personnel carriers with 50 soldiers in blue helmets out onto the road, to man an undefended position.

He said this out-gunned force had a blunt order - "Stop the Serbian offensive".

Janvier's chief-of-operations was Dutch lieutenant colonel Harm de Jonge, who said the idea for the blocking force was his.

De Jonge told the inquiry that the idea behind the move, which made no sense in military terms, was to act as a political tripwire to halt the Serbs. "The UN had to draw a line in the sand. We had to create a situation in which air support could not be denied. At the same time, Janvier sent a warning to [Bosnian Serb] General Ratko Mladic - in case of an attack on the blocking position, NATO-close air support will be deployed."

He then sent Commander Karremans a fax saying, "You can count on supplementary means."

The Serb attack was launched early on the morning of July 10, when the town was shelled. In response, Dutchbat fired into the air in warning.

Karremans requested air support. The Bosnian Serb units avoided confrontation by wheeling around the Dutch position to attack the town from another direction.

Meanwhile, the request for air support went to the UN office in Sarajevo and from there to UN headquarters in Zagreb.

De Jonge said he told Janvier, "You have to act now. The battalion needs you now. Serb infantry are attacking."

He said all officers in Zagreb, with the exception of a French colonel, agreed with his assessment.

Nevertheless, Janvier called off plans for an attack later that evening after several phone calls to unknown persons, said De Jonge.

In Sarajevo, the UN chief-of-staff was a Dutch general, Cees Nicolai. He told the inquiry he could not understand the logic of calling off the attack.

"Zagreb gives this idiotic order for a blocking position," said Nicolai. "Then they have a meeting for several hours, and then they call it off. The position was designed to attract fire. And it did."

Another Dutch officer closely involved was General Frank van Kappen, military advisor to then-UN secretary general Boutros-Ghali. He said he had the impression that General Janvier was worried that air strikes at Srebrenica could lead to Serb retaliation against other UN units elsewhere in Bosnia.

In May of that year, General Van der Vlis told the inquiry that Javier may have been worried about a repeat of May 1995, when Serb forces retaliated for the bombing of their capital, Pale, by taking hundreds of UN soldiers, many of them French, hostage.

"The NATO commander in the area, US general Leighton Smith, could have sent 80-90 planes to prevent the fall of the enclave. General Mladic feared air weapons," said Scheffer.

"But you have to react at once, not send two planes after four hours when the enclave has already collapsed. I'm still very disappointed that our allies weren't ready to help us."

The Dutch special representative at the UN in New York, ambassador Niek Biegan, said he had had doubts that air support would come after a conversation with Boutros-Ghali in 1994.

He disclosed to the inquiry, "Although we talked about the issue all night, Boutros-Ghali kept on saying that he would do his best."

Defence minister Relus ter Beek, on the other hand, took Boutros-Ghali's words at face value, claiming the then-Secretary General "later confirmed the guarantee in a letter".

On the day Srebrenica was overrun by Bosnian Serb troops, Jan Pronk, then Dutch government minister for development and humanitarian affairs, told the government he feared for the lives of Muslim men whom Mladic might consider "warriors". He told the inquiry, "The Netherlands failed."

"In my opinion the focus of the government changed during the meeting," said Pronk. "First the safety of Dutchbat had priority. (But) in the end it was stated that the Dutch should link their fate to the Muslims. Only if they were at gunpoint should Dutchbat leave."

Pronk said he wanted Dutch troops to keep an eye on any Muslims taken for questioning by the Serb forces to make sure they came back alive. But Karremans said that he "never received an order to delay the departure of the Dutch after the fall of the enclave".

He repeated his statement of 1995, "In my contacts with UNPROFOR [United Nations Protection Force] in Sarajevo on July 12, I was ordered to take good care of the men. I replied that there was only a handful of Muslim men in and around the Dutchbat compound in Potocari."

It turned out that several hundred had already disappeared. Karremans said, "With hindsight it would have been better to keep the men in the compound. I could have done something, but the evacuation of the refugees went too quick."

The three-week hearings are to end on November 28, with their conclusions published next January.

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