

Regional Report: Srebrenica Inquiry Inconclusive

Author: [Othon Zimmermann](#)

Dutch inquiry into the Srebrenica massacre fails to account for UN failure to defend the enclave.

The new Dutch government – yet to be finalised following January elections – is expected to hold a parliamentary debate next month over the inconclusive findings of an inquiry into the Srebrenica massacre.

The inquiry ended just over a month ago after key former officials refused to give evidence.

More than seven years after the atrocity, the world is still no nearer knowing why the UN refused to save the town when it was attacked by Bosnian Serb forces in July 1995.

"The book on Srebrenica isn't closed. Only another page was turned," said inquiry chairman Bert Bakker, a Dutch MP.

The investigation was ordered after another investigation, lasting five years, by the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation ,NIOD, reported last April.

That first report blamed both the Dutch and the UN for failing to defend the town. Its publication led to the mass resignation of the Dutch cabinet and the commissioning of the present parliamentary inquiry.

But Bakker said that while Dutch military and civilian officials cooperated with the two months of hearings, other key UN officials did not.

Both the top UN military commander, French general Bernard Janvier, and his civilian counterpart, Special Representative Yasushi Akashi, refused to appear.

"We tried via our embassies, their embassies, via UN, their government, our government," said Bakker.

"In the end we got a disappointing note from Janvier in which he asked us to communicate via the French government.

"It's no relief for the relatives of all the victims, nor for the members of Dutchbat. The French have the idea that the Dutch should have fought harder."

The circumstances of the fall of the town are well known.

In July 1995, Bosnian Serb forces under General Ratko Mladic launched a powerful attack on Srebrenica.

The town was a UN Safe Area, and was guarded by a lightly armed Dutch battalion.

Light arms were thought to be enough because, in the event of attack, the UN had NATO bombers at its disposal.

When the fighting began, a handful of air strikes took place, but Janvier called a halt to further ones.

None of the many inquiry witnesses, including Dutch officers working as liaison staff at UN headquarters, were able to explain why.

"His (Janvier's) argument that it was dark makes no sense. Before that he consulted extensively by phone with people, we don't know who," said Bakker.

Why Janvier did this, and whether the UN ordered him to, remains a mystery because he did not give evidence. But what followed is no mystery.

Dutch troops decided to stop fighting. Thousands of civilians fled in panic, some were hunted down in the mountains, while others headed for the Dutch compound at Potocari, outside the town.

Serb forces surrounded the compound, and then demanded the Muslims be handed over.

Dutch commanders told the inquiry they decided it was safer to comply.

Their officers said they had no idea at the time the Muslim men would be marched away and massacred. And they also feared that the alternative would be Serb artillery fire aimed into the base.

So the UN troops allowed the Serbs to take the Srebrenica residents away. The women and children were separated from the men, and later bussed to Bosnian government territory.

The men were taken to nearby fields and machine gunned.

The only senior UN commander to agree to testify was the former UN commander in Bosnia in 1995, British general Sir Rupert Smith. "Dutchbat did what it could do," he said.

Former Dutch premier Ruud Lubbers placed the blame mainly on the US and France for not providing air support.

Until the tragedy, Dutchbat commander Thom Karremans and his deputy, Major Rob Franken, told the inquiry committee they did not realise Mladic and his troops would be so ruthless.

"They totally underestimated the evil," said Bakker.

The inquiry said Karremans should have opened up the compound for more refugees in Potocari.

Bakker said Dutch officers faced "devilish dilemmas" after the fall of the enclave, with some officers taking matters into their own hands to save at least a few individuals.

"One officer took the opportunity to evacuate male-refugees together with women and children," he said. "But a colleague-officer claimed that he supported, by doing so, ethnic cleansing. Both officers are convinced now that their position was the right one."

The findings of the inquiry, which began hearings in November, include the conclusion that the Dutch government rightly stepped down last April because the cabinet had a "great responsibility" for the tragedy.

Bakker said Holland had sent its peacekeepers with little idea of what they were expected to do.

He said it was "quite naive to make a decision without knowing what we could expect. It was a difficult mission in a very aggressive war. We didn't realise that really.

"When they prepared this mission there was no idea of the seriousness, depth and complexity of the conflict. Despite all good intentions, the Netherlands wasn't able to prevent a mass murder and couldn't protect the population."

The Dutch also made other mistakes - including military commanders' refusal to accept sophisticated intelligence-apparatus offered by the US. The army turned it down without informing the minister of defence.

But the buck stops with the Serbs: their units carried out the massacre, which was unprecedented even by the grim standards of the Bosnian war.

The inquiry recommends that the "Dutch government should actively insist on the arrest of (Hague fugitives) General Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic".

Finally, it advises, "Although the sorrow can't be taken away, the Dutch government should contribute to improve the position of the relatives of the victims."

Living in poverty, and unable to return to homes still held by the Serbs, they are clearly in need of assistance.

Aid, however, will be of little consolation to the Srebrenica survivors who know that had the Dutch held their nerve and the UN used its planes their menfolk might be alive today.

Othon Zimmermann is Foreign Policy Correspondent for Algemeen Dagblad, Rotterdam.

Location: Bosnia and Herzegovina

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/regional-report-srebrenica-inquiry>