

Serb Assembly Rejects Srebrenica Declaration

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Fears that Serbia might have to pay war reparations sinks plans to condemn 1995 slaughter.

Serbia's parliament has backed away from plans to formally condemn war crimes in Srebrenica, in what observers said is another sign of Serbian unwillingness to accept responsibility for the past.

Observers believe parliament was afraid a declaration on Srebrenica might affect the ongoing suit at the International Court of Justice, ICJ, which Bosnia and Hercegovina brought against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1993.

In the case, Sarajevo accused the Belgrade government of being an accomplice to genocide. If Bosnia wins the case, Serbia and Montenegro, as the successor state to the old Yugoslavia, will have to pay reparations.

Officially, however, parliament did not condemn the killing of up to 8,000 Bosniaks in the town in July 1995 because the various parliamentary factions could not agree on what the declaration should say.

Some deputies wanted the text to specifically mention Srebrenica, while others argued for a more general statement.

Many NGOs and political activists attacked the inaction as further proof of Serbia's inability to make a clean break with the regime of Slobodan Milosevic.

One activist said he was not surprised by the failure, as "an acknowledgement of the Srebrenica crimes would implicate those parties who sit in the parliament".

The minority government of Vojislav Kostunica governs with the support of Milosevic's Socialist Party of Serbia, SPS, while the strongest opposition party, with 83 deputies in the 250-seat assembly, is the Serbian Radical Party, SRS, whose leader Vojislav Seselj is in the Hague alongside Milosevic.

The original declaration, submitted several weeks ago, was the initiative of eight NGOs and two deputies in parliament, Natasa Micic and Zarko Korac.

Biljana Kovacevic Vuco, president of the Human Rights Lawyers Committee, which drafted the text of the NGOs' declaration, told Balkan Crisis Report, BCR, what they had hoped to see.

"The declaration suggested that the Serbian state should clearly disavow the Srebrenica genocide and everything done in Serbia's name in unambiguous terms," she said.

Andrej Nosov, of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, one of the NGOs, said its adoption would have meant that Serbia admitted it "conducted a policy of genocide, lost the war, was an aggressor, and hence, had to accept moral and political responsibility".

Their initiative might have sunk without trace had it not been for the recent release of shocking television footage showing members of a Serbian paramilitary unit, the Scorpions, shooting dead several young Muslim prisoners from Srebrenica in 1995.

The video, which shook Serbian public, was revealed at The Hague and shown on Serbia's B92 television station in early June.

The first reaction came from the SRS, which tabled a draft resolution condemning all war crimes committed on the territory of former Yugoslavia, but without specifically mentioning Srebrenica.

Under pressure from the international community and the Serbian public, Predrag Markovic, speaker of parliament, also took up the initiative.

Others also weighed in, leaving parliament with four different versions of the declaration to consider.

Not surprisingly, disagreements soon arose about which should be adopted.

Kostunica's party, the Democratic Party of Serbia, DSS, and the SPS, made it clear they wanted only a blanket condemnation of all crimes, regardless of who perpetrated them.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Party, DS, led by the Serbian President, Boris Tadic, and the Serbian Renewal Movement, SPO, led by the state union foreign minister, Vuk Draskovic, wanted to stress the crime in Srebrenica.

Many observers, however, believe the real reason parliament abandoned the declaration was not a failure to agree on the document's wording but for purely financial reasons relating to the ongoing suit at the ICJ.

Bosnia brought the charges following the discovery in 1993 of Serb-run detention camps at Omarska and Keraterm, where numerous Bosniaks were killed.

Kovacevic Vuco believes a resolution would have little effect on the eventual outcome of the case.

"If the International Court of Justice rules in favour of Bosnia and Hercegovina... we will have to pay reparations ... and we cannot avoid it by denying or refusing to adopt the declaration," she said.

Vojin Dimitrijevic, an expert in international law and director of the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, agreed, saying a Srebrenica declaration would have been "is a moral act, which could not be used in the International Court of Justice".

He said Bosnia's case will only succeed if it established a direct link between the Srebrenica killings and the Yugoslav state apparatus and proved that Belgrade not only provided financial support but that its army and police also took part.

Zarko Korac, who submitted the NGO declaration to the parliament, said it was shameful that Serbia was lagging behind the Bosnian Serb entity, the Republika Srpska, RS, when it came to acknowledging the significance of the massacre.

"This policy, which resulted in the massacre of 7,800 Bosniaks in Srebrenica, was created in Belgrade," Korac told BCR.

"That is why it is so difficult [for us] to accept responsibility and offer an apology - from the place where the whole project was devised."

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