

## **Serbia: Muslims Mourn Murdered Relatives**

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I first heard about the Strpci abduction after it took place in 1993. Back then, I was a 22-year-old law student. I even didn't know where Strpci was.

That was during the dark ages of Serbian politics. Slobodan Milosevic was in power, inflation was on the rise, wars burned throughout the former Yugoslavia.

During that time, many people were killed, disappeared or went to fight in the Bosnian war.

Organised crime grew and human life was not considered "worth a penny". The future seemed bleak.

Fifteen years later, early on the morning of February 27, 2008, 20 representatives from NGOs wait at a bus station in Belgrade. They are setting off to the small village of Strpce in south Serbia, near Prijepolje.

They were going to commemorate the anniversary of an appalling crime that took place in 1993, when 19 Muslims were killed by Bosnian Serb paramilitaries after being abducted from a train traveling from Serbia to Montenegro.

Prosecutors at the Hague tribunal accuse Milan Lukic of having led the group, which was attached to the Bosnian Serb army, VRS. He is currently awaiting trial.

Nebojsa Ranisavljevic, the only member of the group to be prosecuted so far, was sentenced to 15 years in prison by a court in Montenegro in September 2002.

Documentary evidence submitted at the trial suggested that the Serbian train company ZTP had information about the planned abduction as early as January 1993 and passed it to the government the following month.

High-level officials from police, the secret service, the army and the train company discussed the intelligence, but decided to do nothing, astonishingly, because they believed the VRS operation was aimed at rounding up people for a prison exchange.

As we traveled to Prijepolje last month, I remembered hearing that Slobodan Milosevic had received the victims' families in his luxury residence in Belgrade.

Although he put on a "worried face", at this moment, he knew - as was discovered later - that Serbian authorities had been informed about the abduction months before it happened and did nothing to prevent it.

When I wrote this piece for IWPR, I had a rare opportunity to look deep into the “book of death” of the dark Nineties in the former Yugoslavia.

We reached Prijepolje at 1pm, after a trip of almost six hours. The small town lies deep in a valley surrounded by mountains. The River Lim runs through its centre.

In front of an official building downtown, families and relatives of those killed gathered and formed a line. They opened their black banners which were emblazoned with slogans, saying, “For all war victims”; “Strpci - 15 years later,”; “We remember the crimes in Sandzak”; “Do not forget the crime in Strpci”.

For the most part, those passing by didn’t stop to read the slogans. Only a few elderly people did so.

After 15 minutes, the silent ceremony was over. We came to the bridge on the Lim, where nine dead people were thrown into the river. This information emerged during Ranisavljevic’s trial - their bodies have never been found.

Their relatives laid flowers on the sides of the bridge without any words. Every day, dozens of people pass by. Do they think about what happened here? I have no answer.

We then took a bus and traveled for 40 minutes to Strpci village, which lay over the Bosnian border. An Indian colleague forgot her passport and had to stay at the border with her camera.

Almost 60 people walked up the tarmac mountain road for 20 minutes.

I spoke to the victims’ families and relatives during the walk, trying not to ask them questions that were too painful.

They are still angry at the Serbian state because it neither tried to prevent nor investigate the crime. Sometimes, it is hard to retain one’s distance as journalist.

Strpci train station is deep in the forest of Goles mountain - a beautiful, idyllic landscape. They say there are wolves and bears in the mountains. The station has not been in use since the abduction.

Some of the Strpci victims were killed near the station. The rest were taken to a primary school in the village of Prelovo near Visegrad, where they were tortured, beaten and killed.

At the train station, families open their banners, as reporters and TV cameras record the event. For many of the relatives, it was their first time at the crime scene.

They put a bunch of flowers next to a lamp post, near the huge mountain tunnel and then raised their hands in the air and said a prayer for the dead.

A train came through the tunnel at 15:48 - the exact time of the abduction 15 years before.

**Aleksandar Roknic is an IWPR-trained journalist.**

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**[Link to original story](#)** by Aleksandar Roknic in TU No 540, 29-Feb-08.

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