

Srebrenica Comes Back to Haunt Netherlands

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Dutch parliament again probes government responsibility for Srebrenica massacre.

After years of soul-searching and two inquiries that saw the resignation of the government, the lower house of the Dutch parliament addressed the Srebrenica massacre again last week in an effort to put to rest an issue that has been haunting politics in the Netherlands for nearly a decade.

In a debate on June 4 and 5, parliamentarians acknowledged their country's responsibility for the 1995 massacre in Srebrenica in which more than 7,000 Muslim men and boys were killed while under the protection of Dutch peacekeepers serving with the United Nations force in Bosnia.

The debate addressed the findings of an earlier parliamentary inquiry which showed that Dutch decision-makers failed in their duties to ensure that Srebrenica was protected.

"The Netherlands is not guilty, but it is to blame. Despite good intentions it was not able to protect the enclave," said Bert Bakker, the head of the parliamentary committee that led the investigation.

The first attempt by the Netherlands government to come to terms with Srebrenica was as far back as early 1996. The original report, based on the debriefing of soldiers, concluded that neither the Dutch government nor its military bore any responsibility for the massacre, and that the blame rested almost exclusively with the Bosnian Serb forces who overran the enclave.

That conclusion met with harsh criticism both inside and outside Netherlands, and was dismissed as a whitewash.

In the wake of the criticism, the Dutch government commissioned the Dutch Institute for War Documentation, NIOD, in 1996 to undertake another investigation into what happened at Srebrenica.

Six years and six million dollars later, NIOD presented its 7,000 page report in April last year.

The Dutch government found the report so damning that the then prime minister Wim Kok and his government resigned.

Survivors of the massacre were not so convinced. They found the report so watered down that many walked out of the government hall when the findings were announced to the public. They further claimed that the resignation of the government was pointless since it occurred just weeks before a general election.

It was to give that report more political clout that the lower house of the parliament – the most powerful political body in the Netherlands – recently launched a new inquiry.

Aimed at reaching a "final political judgment", the inquiry resulted in a harsh report entitled "Srebrenica – Mission Without Peace". It concluded that government had "rightly" stepped down in 2002, because of its

"great responsibility" for the Srebrenica massacre.

During the latest parliamentary debate, deputies agreed unanimously that the Netherlands bore a special responsibility to the survivors as well as to relatives of the victims. Some said that financial support to Srebrenica survivors should be maintained in spite of Holland's economic woes.

A proposal by left-wing parties to grant refuge to traumatised survivors of the massacre did not get the necessary majority, even though parties across the political spectrum appeared to favour a more generous approach to asylum seekers from Srebrenica.

Some deputies went even further and tried to push through a resolution asking the government to admit its guilt and formally apologise to the survivors. The commission chairman rejected this suggestion, saying that the word "guilt" could have dire legal consequences, such as claims for compensation. Bakker also said that it would be "a cheap and hollow gesture".

Parliament again called on the Dutch government to do everything in its power to bring to justice Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadzic and army commander General Ratko Mladic - both of whom are wanted by the Hague court, and to put further pressure on Serbia and Montenegro and Republika Srpska to cooperate more fully with the war crimes tribunal.

On June 18 Prime Minister Jan-Peter Balkenende is expected to address the Netherlands parliament about the outcome of the investigation, in what the government hopes will be the final chapter in a long process.

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