

## **Srebrenica Massacre Victims Remembered**

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Several thousand Srebrenica refugees return to commemorate those who died following the Bosnian Serb seizure of the town.

One hot July day in 1995, Tuzla regional hospital employees were called in to work to cope with an unprecedented emergency. Buses began arriving carrying tens of thousands of Muslims expelled from the so-called United Nation's "safe haven" of Srebrenica, which had just fallen to Bosnian Serb forces.

This year, for the first time, a commemorative ceremony was held at Potocari, the former UN base inside the enclave, to remember the 7,800 people who disappeared in the days following the defeat of the enclave.

Local authorities, Serb and Muslim, and the international administration have prevented previous memorial ceremonies for fear of stoking-up tensions.

As IWPR went to press, around 3,500 people, including Bosnian Muslim tripartite president, Alija Izetbegovic, were expected to attend. International officials had called for the numbers to be kept down, fearful extremists from both sides could use the event to stir up violence. Only the night before, arsonists destroyed the home of one of Srebrenica's few Muslim residents.

With elections looming in November, there is little doubt nationalist parties, such as Izetbegovic's Party of Democratic Action, SDA, could exploit any increase in tension prompted by the ceremony.

Soon after the fall of the enclave, Bosniak political parties grasped the electoral potential of Srebrenica's refugees. The SDA drew votes from them for several years by highlighting their fate and promising to help them return. To date, however, only four refugees have been allowed back to the town. (See Balkans Crisis Report No. 146).

During the three years of conflict preceding the events in Srebrenica, Tuzla had absorbed some 150,000 refugees. That July, however, in the space of two days, 30,000 women, children and elderly people poured into the town.

Many were wounded, sick and starving. Aided by a Nordic brigade of the then UN forces in Bosnia, Tuzla's hospital staff carried out preliminary medical checks, separating out the most injured and ill. Emergency food rations were distributed.

The town's reception centres were already full, so state authorities and international representatives commandeered the airport as the only facility large enough to cope with the influx. Over the next four days, some 8,000 men arrived in the town - those who had managed to escape the encircling Bosnian Serb forces on foot through the forests.

Thousands of refugees remained at the airport until the autumn, living in tent villages with little food and water. Children suffered first and second degree burns from exposure to the sun on the airport tarmac. Some elderly people died. Then the refugees were separated again and moved on, shuttled around various collection centres and refugee settlements across the region.

When the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords prompted thousands of Bosnian Serbs to flee their homes in Sarajevo's suburbs, who better to move into the now empty homes, than Srebrenica's dispossessed?

The Dayton Accords explicitly forbade the illegal occupation of abandoned homes, but the refugees were secretly transported from Tuzla to take up residence in the abandoned houses.

It was a welcome relief from the discomfort of the collection centres. But soon they began to leave for other countries in Europe or further afield, in an effort to escape grinding poverty, unemployment and hopelessness.

Nearly 8,000 husbands, fathers and sons are still listed as missing. The remains of around 2,000 people have been exhumed from mass graves around Srebrenica. The bodies are stored in tunnels behind the Tuzla mortuary awaiting DNA tests, which will hopefully provide some identification. So far conventional methods have identified only 76 victims.

The Hague Tribunal has issued indictments against several suspects for alleged crimes committed in Srebrenica. So far only one man has been convicted - Drazen Erdemovic - and only one other is currently on trial - General Radislav Krstic, former commander of the Bosnian Serb army's Drina Corps, which captured the town.

On July 11 every year, the women of Srebrenica stage peaceful protests in Tuzla and Sarajevo calling on Bosnian and international officials to tell the truth about their missing, and demanding the return of their lost relatives - dead or alive.

To date, the women have received only a public apology from Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General, for the organisation's failure to prevent the Srebrenica crimes. He said the tragedy would always "burden our past."

Srebrenica's inhabitants are now scattered all over the world. Those who remain behind are left to fend for themselves. The only thing that keeps them going, they say, is a wish to bury their dead in their hometown.

But repatriation is painfully slow. The first to venture back was 86-year-old Sacir Halilovic in April this year. He has now repaired his house and has been joined by his wife, Mevlida.

Sacir is old and ill, but he wants to be near his son's grave. Sead Halilovic, a doctor, was killed in spring 1995 when the helicopter he and three colleagues were travelling in from Tuzla, crashed as it tried to land in the besieged town. "I want to be here, see my son's grave and pray for him," Sacir said.

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