

## **The UN's Mea Culpa Over Srebrenica**

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With uncharacteristic frankness the UN has admitted liability in the deaths of thousands of civilians murdered by Serbian forces in the so-called UN "safe haven".

The UN's long awaited report on Srebrenica is untypically self critical. At the time, IWPR's magazine, War Report, accused the United Nations of being an "accomplice to genocide." This report effectively pleads guilty to that charge. It puts Srebrenica in the context of the whole Bosnian operation, which, according to the report, was "one of the most difficult and painful in our history."

"Through error, misjudgement and an inability to recognise the scope of the evil confronting us, we failed to do our part to help save the people of Srebrenica from the Serb campaign of mass murder," it says.

The report concludes that "Srebrenica crystallised a truth understood only too late by the United Nations and the world at large: that Bosnia was as much a moral cause as a military conflict."

Refreshingly - at least for those who criticised the UN at the time for hiding behind the faults of the member states - the UN report agrees that the institution should be more than the sum of its parts. The international body should take a moral stand, the report says, and should accept responsibility when it fails to do so. This is a considerable shift: while a dozen or so State Department staff resigned over Washington's inaction in Bosnia, no one quit the UN in protest.

But the conclusion should be no surprise. Former UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, in his own account of his tenure, was even more scathing about the overall failure of the UN. In Bosnia, he wrote in his memoir "Unvanquished: A U.S. - U.N. Saga," the UN had betrayed "the key principles of international behaviour: no acquisition of territory by force; no genocide; and guarantees of the integrity and existence of UN member states."

This report, issued under the name of Secretary General Kofi Annan, who was undersecretary for peacekeeping at the time, details and amplifies that conclusion. It survived some serious internecine opposition within the United Nations, where such transparency goes against years of practice.

The original sin regarding Srebrenica was the passage of an ill-judged resolution imposing an arms embargo on all parties, combined with an unwillingness to undertake the defence of the party most affected, the Bosnians. The report records that even at the time in 1992, observers were aware that the resolution, number 713, "would overwhelmingly benefit the Serbs, who were dominant both in the Yugoslav military and, to a lesser extent, in the arms industry."

It also notes that the "withdrawal" of the Yugoslav forces from Bosnia was "largely cosmetic". The troops remained, and the commander, Gen. Ratko Mladic, simply changed his title to commander of the Bosnian Serb Army which "throughout the war that was to . . . rel[y] for materiel, intelligence, funds and other forms of support," on Belgrade. This may seem so obvious that it hardly bears stating, but it is a refreshing admission after so many years of blinkered denial.

The report recalls that the safe areas were the result of an attempt by seriously concerned Security Council members to secure some relief from the besieging Serbs. Embarrassed publicly, the major members agreed to the safe area policy, but dismissed Boutros-Ghali's estimates of how many troops would be needed.

Without explicitly saying so, the report reveals that the UN leadership on the ground in the Balkans had an institutional bias towards believing the Serbs and calumniating the Bosnians. This was certainly apparent in the views expressed by the local UN headquarters, where it was taken as axiomatic that the Serbs were "provoked" by raids from Srebrenica. In fact, the report makes it plain both that the Serbs lied and that the UN troops on the ground believed and passed on those lies. There were in fact very few raids from the enclave, and most of these were foraging trips.

Typically, while Dutch troops's requests for air support in Srebrenica and reports of Serb incursions were getting lost, the erroneous report that the Bosnians had thrown a grenade at a Dutch APC made it to the Security Council within hours. The correction, that it was in fact a Serb tank round, took much longer to reach the Council's ears.

The report also gives the lie to the persistent, rumours inspired by UN forces on the ground that the Bosnians were responsible for the Markale market place massacre. With the acceptance by this report, now everyone except die-hard apologists for Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic acknowledge that it was Serb forces.

The root of the tragedy, as the report acknowledges, was the attitude of the UN on the ground - heavily influenced as it was by the views of the major contributors, the British and French. It was an attitude of moral equivalence.

It was an approach that contorted opponents to fit the expedient world- view that the Serbs and the Bosnians, the perpetrators and the victims, were 'as bad as each other'. So the Bosnians were demonised and the Serbs deemed to be honourable men whose occasional excesses were provoked by Bosnian attempts to bring in outside military intervention.

In particular, when Yasushi Akashi took up the post of UN Special Representative, he extended limitless credibility to the Serbs - believing their assurances, even as the thousands of prisoners in Srebrenica were being gunned down in cold blood. In the end, UN headquarters in New York had to prompt Akashi's office to report on the allegations of a massacre as accounts began to filter out through the media.

The report exonerates, or at least cannot find evidence to substantiate, the allegations that force commander Bernard Janvier struck a deal with Mladic not to use air strikes in return for the release of the mainly French hostages in Serb hands. The report does however confirm that Janvier went to meet Mladic three times in June 1995, - only weeks before the massacre - "to keep channels of communication" open. At that time Rupert Smith, the new commander on the ground in Sarajevo, seemed to think that even the UN forces should not be talking to Mladic while his forces were seizing hostages.

No wonder the report concludes that the "United Nations' global commitment to ending conflict does not preclude moral judgements but makes them necessary." This is a big step forwards for an institution with an almost horizontal learning curve.

However, while the report goes beyond anything that has been produced by the UN before, it reflects its traditional culture: names have been obscured to protect the guilty. Wherever UN or peacekeeping officers are mentioned, it is by title, not name. The US becomes a "non-troop contributing country," and Britain and France become "troop contributing countries."

Interestingly, when UN headquarters is cited as the source of advice, it becomes "the Secretariat," thus apportioning responsibility to what is at best an abstraction in this context, spreading blame among the five or six thousand mostly uninvolved and innocent staff in New York. Since that leaves them each responsible for at least one dead Bosnian, it is a heavy burden to ask them to carry, not least since many staff were unhappy about what was being done in their name.

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**Location:** Balkans  
Macedonia  
Albania  
Serbia

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