

# Historical Security Council – Research Report I

## Managing Ethnic Conflict and Human Rights Violations Resulting from the Srebrenica Massacre (1995)

This Security Council session takes place on the 16<sup>th</sup> of July 1995 and delegates are thus expected to respect and stay within this time frame.

### Introduction to the Topic:

The Srebrenica Massacre was the genocide of the ethnic group of Bosnian Muslims, under the persecution of Bosnian Serbs, during the Bosnian War (1992 – 1995), amounting to the violent treatment and systematic killing of approximately 8000 men and boys in July of 1995, now known to us as one of the worst atrocities in Europe since the Holocaust.

When Bosnia and Herzegovina declared its independence from the federation of Yugoslavia, following a referendum voting in this decision's favour, the ethnic group of Bosnian Serbs disagreed with the decision and took violent action against it. They organized the Siege of Sarajevo, the longest siege in modern European history – lasting from the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 1992 to the 29<sup>th</sup> of February 1996 – surrounding the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Before the fighting broke out, the Bosnian Serbs constructed reinforced artillery positions in the hills overlooking Sarajevo, thinking that by crushing the resistance from that point they would then be able to overcome it everywhere. Once the fighting commenced, they assumed their positions surrounding Sarajevo and began a total blockade, denying the city of food, power, and water. Recognizing that while stronger than the militia that defended the city, they were heavily outnumbered, the Bosnian Serbs settled into a contest of endurance while the militia attempted to break the siege.

From May 1992, Bosnian Serb Forces under the command of General Ratko Mladić used shelling and sniping to target civilian areas of the city and key institutions, killing, wounding, and inflicting terror upon the civilian population. During this time, almost all of Sarajevo's cultural, religious, and residential buildings were either partially or completely destroyed. Serb artillery caused extensive destruction in Sarajevo, with over 300 shells striking daily, targeting schools, hospitals, and homes. Nearly every building was damaged and sniper fire made the city unsafe. Starvation loomed until the UN organized a massive humanitarian airlift, involving over 12000 flights from 20 countries. A tunnel completed in 1993 provided limited supplies, but malnutrition persisted, and many elderly died in unheated homes during winter.

By July of 1992, the Bosnian Serbs' ethnic cleansing campaign of Bosniaks had intensified, involving brutal violence, the displacement of several people of their homes, forced deportations, and imprisonment in camps of poor conditions, all of which hundreds of thousands were victims to. Due to this, the UN and the international community felt the need to establish safe areas in Bosnia, including the cities of Srebrenica, Zepa, and Gorazde, as protection for civilians amidst the ongoing ethnic violations.

Thereafter, Bosnian Serb Forces began to focus particular attention on capturing the strategically located Srebrenica and expelling the Bosnian Muslim population that had fled there in the aftermath of the 1992 – 1993 ‘ethnic cleansing’ campaigns in eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March 1995, Radovan Karadžić (the political leader of the Bosnian Serbs), ordered the Serb Forces to eliminate the Muslim territory of Srebrenica. Bosnian Serb forces initiated an assault on the UN-declared "safe area" of Srebrenica, targeting the Bosniak population within the enclave on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July, by the 11<sup>th</sup>, after days of sustained attacks, General Ratko Mladić (commander of the Bosnian Serb army) and his forces entered Srebrenica, capturing the enclave. This marked the start of the Srebrenica massacre. Subsequently, those Bosnian Serb Forces terrorized Bosnian Muslims, who were forcibly transferred to areas outside the enclave and many of whom fled in a huge column through the woods towards Tuzla (a free territory). Most of this group consisted of civilians. Over 7000 Bosnian Muslim prisoners captured in the area around Srebrenica were abruptly executed from the 13<sup>th</sup> of July to the 19<sup>th</sup> of July 1995.

As the Serbian stronghold expanded, so did the numbers of those captured, and many were imprisoned in concentration camps where they faced inhumane conditions, including torture, starvation, sexual violence and executions, as part of a systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing against non-Serb populations. One of the biggest camps was Omarska, in the city of Prijedor, notorious for being the site of the 1992 Prijedor Massacre during the Bosnian War and estimated to have held around 3000 prisoners in the early months of 1992.



Figure 1.1 – Casualties of Bosnian Muslims from *ethnic cleansing campaign* from 1992 to 1995.

(Remembering Srebrenica, 2021)

### Background Information:

As a multi-ethnic federation, Yugoslavia’s stability slowly began to disintegrate during the 1980s, due to a lack of unity and similar interest amongst the many ethnic groups living under this same rule. Within Yugoslavia’s six republics and various ethnicities were the Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, Slovenes, Macedonians, and Albanians. Throughout the unfolding of the decade, nationalism grew popular and each republic and respective

ethnicity began prioritizing their separate belief-motivated interests instead of fighting to preserve federal unity. As economic disparities among the republics grew more evident, with the wealthier republics having to subsidize those less wealthy as to maintain the federation's economy, the republics' unity was damaged. However, the triggering of conflict within Yugoslavia only came with the death of its leader, Marshal Josip Broz Tito, on May 4<sup>th</sup> of 1980, since the country was at a sudden loss of a central figure to preserve unity and join the republic's separate interests, leaving it vulnerable to internal division.

Sensing the country's rapid disintegration, the first assertions of independence within Yugoslavia's republics came from Slovenia and Croatia on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June of 1991. These movements of independence were largely supported by Western powers. On the other hand, republics like Serbia, fought to maintain the federation of Yugoslavia, mainly wishing for it to be ruled under Serbian control.

One of the most ethnically diverse – and thus divided – republics was Bosnia Herzegovina, its population consisting of three main ethnic groups, Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) – mainly Muslim in faith and in support of a multi-ethnic state –, Bosnian Serbs – mainly Orthodox Christians and supporting a Serbian controlled Yugoslavia –, and Bosnian Croats – mainly Catholic and supporting independence of all republics. Following the lead of other republics in their wave of political assertions of power, Bosnia and Herzegovina too had to decide its future, thus a referendum was held from February 29<sup>th</sup> to March 1<sup>st</sup> of 1992 to determine whether it should declare independence from the federation of Yugoslavia or remain under its control. The results of the referendum showed 99% in favour of independence, – with an overwhelmingly low voter turnout of 63.4% - prompting the republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina to formally declare its independence on March 1<sup>st</sup> of 1992, officially separating itself from the federation of Yugoslavia.

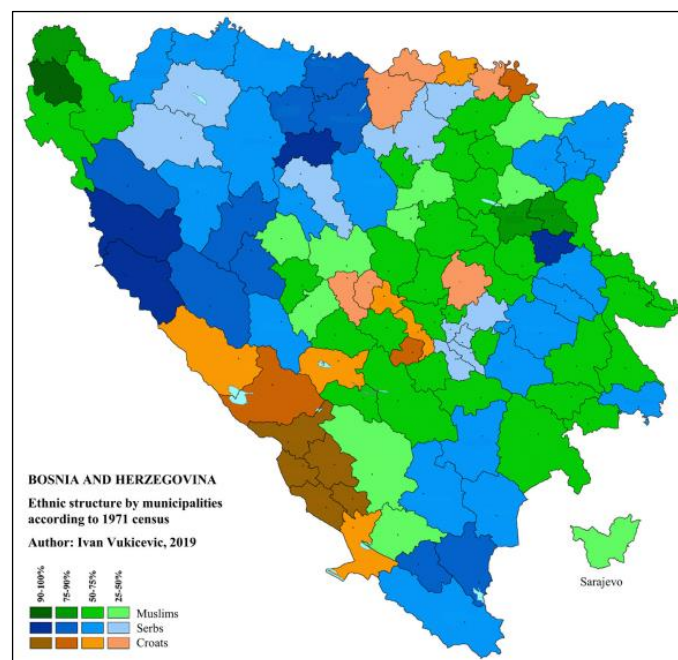


Figure 1.2 – Ethnic structure in Bosnia and Herzegovina by municipalities according to 1971 census. (Wikimedia, 2021)

However, the ethnic group of the Bosnian Serbs – most of which were responsible for the low voter turnout as an act of passive rebellion – felt the result of the referendum was unfair and unrepresentative of the several ethnic groups, alleging even that it was poorly organized and biased. This stemmed from the fact that as Bosnian Serbs, they wished to remain under the federation of Yugoslavia which was currently controlled by the republic of Serbia – where their loyalties lied. Their resistance went from a passive to an active level when they formed an alliance with the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and along with the Bosnian Serb paramilitary groups, they launched a military campaign aiming to seize control of certain territories in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This followed several acts violence and 'ethnic cleansing' marked by countless massacres, displacement of people, and systematic killings. The Bosnian War began.

### **Recent Developments:**

From July 5<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup>, the Bosnian Serb forces captured a UN observation post at Srebrenica, intensely shelled the territory, and captured hostages amongst the fleeing of refugees. The Dutch UN forces stationed there repeatedly asked for air support from UN commanders, but their pleas were rejected, and the enclave was left defenceless. From July 9<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup>, the Bosnian Serb rebels cleared the road leading into Srebrenica, for the arrival of General Mladić, who soon demanded the surrender of weapons. Meanwhile NATO was ineffective in its attempts of providing air support given the threats being made against the hostages. On July 11<sup>th</sup> Srebrenica officially fell, and more than 20000 refugees mostly women, children, and elderly, sought refuge at the Dutch UN base in Potočari, though only 5000 were allowed inside. That night, 15000 Bosniak men attempted a risky escape to Tuzla on foot.

From July 12<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup>, Bosnian Serb forces separated the men of ages 12 to 77 from the women and children, deporting over 23000 women and children. The men were detained, questioned, and executed in mass killings. During the "Death March," which continued until July 16<sup>th</sup>, the men faced constant shelling, and over 8000 Bosniak men and boys were systematically murdered. Survivors of the march eventually reached Muslim-held territory.

### **Focus of the debate:**

Delegates should focus on acting against the humanitarian crimes committed in Srebrenica, making use of sanctions among other means of action. Humanitarian aid to displaced and injured peoples is crucial at this point of the crisis, as well as the establishment of rehabilitation centres for said peoples.

### **Parties Involved:**

**Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks):** one of the main ethnic groups fighting for independence from Yugoslavia alongside the Croats. The Bosnian government, led by Alija Izetbegović, sought international recognition for Bosnia's sovereignty and resisted the Serb-led attempts to carve out ethnically pure territories. The Bosniaks wanted independence from Yugoslavia and to protect their territorial integrity, including Srebrenica, which had been declared a "safe area" by the UN. They sought to preserve Bosnian territory and protect their people from ethnic cleansing.

**Serbia:** under Slobodan Milošević, supported the Bosnian Serbs, led by Radovan Karadžić and military commander Ratko Mladić, in their efforts to create a Greater Serbia by forcibly removing non-Serb populations from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbian forces carried out ethnic cleansing and were directly responsible for the Srebrenica massacre. Serbia's goal was to secure control over large parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly areas with Bosnian Serb populations, and to maintain influence over Bosnian Serbs.

**Croatia:** led by Franjo Tuđman, supported the Bosnian Croats in their fight for a separate Croatian entity within Bosnia. Croatian forces fought against both the Bosnian Serbs and, at times, the Bosnian government forces. Croatia's primary interest was to create a Croatian-controlled region in Bosnia, which could potentially align with Croatia's territorial ambitions. Croatia sought to protect the Bosnian Croat population while gaining influence in the region.

**United Nations (UN):** tasked with maintaining peace and protecting civilians through UNPROFOR, which had peacekeepers stationed in Bosnia, including in the Srebrenica "safe area." Despite its presence, the UN struggled to prevent the escalation of violence and failed to stop the Bosnian Serb forces from taking control of Srebrenica.

**North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO):** involved in Bosnia through airstrikes and supporting UN operations. While its aircrafts were prepared to conduct airstrikes on Bosnian Serb positions during the Srebrenica crisis, the UN's reluctance and delays in issuing timely requests for air support meant that its role in the immediate protection of Srebrenica was limited.

**United States of America:** The U.S. played a crucial diplomatic role, although initially, it took a more hands-distant approach regarding military intervention. The U.S. government, under President Bill Clinton, became more actively involved in pushing for diplomatic solutions and supporting NATO airstrikes against Bosnian Serb positions, however, it did not provide direct military intervention until after the massacre.

**France:** France, a member of NATO and the UN, had troops in Bosnia as part of UNPROFOR. French forces were stationed in Srebrenica to provide protection to civilians but faced limitations in their ability to act decisively against Bosnian Serb forces.

**United Kingdom:** The UK, another NATO member, had peacekeeping troops deployed in Bosnia under UNPROFOR. British forces, like those from other countries, faced constraints in terms of authority to use force to protect civilians and were unable to prevent the Bosnian Serb forces from overtaking Srebrenica.

**Russian Federation:** Russia, a key ally of Serbia, generally supported the Bosnian Serbs diplomatically. While it did not engage directly in the fighting, it used its influence in the UN Security Council to oppose certain Western actions, particularly regarding the use of force against Bosnian Serb positions. Russia's primary interest was to maintain its strategic relationship with Serbia and support Bosnian Serb interests.

### **Past UN Actions and Possible Solutions:**

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 1993, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 819, declaring that Srebrenica and a 30 square mile area around the town was a United Nations Safe Area.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 1993, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 836 which expanded the role of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) and called for the use of force in the defence of the safe areas. However, this mandate was not fully implemented, and UN peacekeepers were still hesitant to use force without explicit orders.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1995, following the Bosnian Serbs' invasion of the Srebrenica "safe area", Colonel Karremans, the Dutch commander, formally requested air support to target Bosnian Serb artillery and tanks.

Delegates may use sanctions of the military, economic, or moral nature, as means to condemn the actions taken in Srebrenica. Measures such as the establishment of neutral and distanced safe zones, humanitarian aid campaigns, and monitored peace-talks are also highly encouraged.

### **Glossary and Key Terms:**

**Blockade:** an act of war whereby one-party blocks entry to or departure from a defined part of an enemy's territory, most often its coasts.

**Ethnic cleansing:** the attempt to create ethnically homogeneous geographic areas through the deportation or forcible displacement of persons belonging to particular ethnic groups.

**Federal system:** mode of political organization that unites separate states or other polities within an overarching political system in a way that allows each to maintain its own integrity.

**Militia:** military organization of citizens with limited military training, which is available for emergency service, usually for local defence.

**Multi-ethnic federation:** form of federal system in which the federated regional or state units are defined by ethnicity.

**Municipality:** a town or district that has local government.

**Paramilitary:** a group or organization that operates outside a country's formal military structure.

**Referendum:** a general vote by the electorate on a single political question that has been referred to them for a direct decision, a public vote.

**Safe area:** an area of a country at war, etc, where civilians are protected from attack.

**Siege:** a military operation in which enemy forces surround a town or building, cutting off essential supplies, with the aim of compelling those inside to surrender.

**Subsidize:** support (an organization or activity) financially.

**Voter turnout:** a measure of the percentage of voters that have taken part in the election (a proportion of eligible voters who cast a vote).

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