

A POWERFUL VOICE FOR LIFESAVING ACTION

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Srebrenica Ten Years Later: Time to Stop Ignoring the Lessons

On July 11, 1995, the Bosnian town of Srebrenica fell to advancing Serb military forces. Although declared a safe area by the United Nations, and protected by 350 Dutch troops serving under the UN flag, there was no NATO response to the attack. In the succeeding days, up to 8,000 men and boys of Srebrenica were removed from the town and executed by Serb forces in the surrounding hills and valleys. "Srebrenica was the failure of NATO, of the West, of peacekeeping and of the United Nations," said former U.S. envoy to the Balkans, and Refugees International Board Member, Richard Holbrooke. "It was the tragedy that should never be allowed to happen again."

"Never Again," however, has proved meaningless as a call to action. It was said after the Holocaust, yet Cambodia and Rwanda happened. It was repeated after Rwanda, yet Srebrenica happened. It was said after Srebrenica, yet now the world witnesses the horror of Darfur. These atrocities, though different in scale and with varying root causes, have the following in common: pledges to respond by leaders of countries with the power to stop the killing, followed by the failure of those same leaders to authorize effective preventive action. In 2001 President Bush introduced a new pledge in a written notation on a briefing document describing the horror of the Rwandan genocide: "Not on my watch." But on President Bush's watch genocide in Darfur has occurred. As former Canadian General Romeo Dallaire, the UN Force Commander in

Rwanda in 1994, recently stated," Preventing genocide requires hard work and not catchy phrases."

In the former Yugoslavia, NATO air strikes could have prevented much of the slaughter at Srebrenica. The Dutch UN Force Commander pleaded for those air strikes, but they did not come. As a result, 8,000 Bosnian Muslims were killed.

Has anything been learned since Srebrenica? Perhaps. In 2000, the Panel on UN Peace Operations released the Brahimi report, so named in reference to the head of the Panel, Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi, recommending a number of changes to the way the UN conducts peacekeeping activities. According to the report, "No failure did more to damage the standing and credibility of United Nations peacekeeping in the 1990s than its reluctance to distinguish victim from aggressor." UN peacekeeping must seek to be impartial, but that impartiality should be based on upholding the UN Charter and the mission's mandate. This is not the same as maintaining neutrality, a policy which in the former Yugoslavia forced the peacekeeping mission to appease all sides and take action against none. The report says that those who commit violence against civilians must be stopped, and this may require taking assertive action against such so-called "spoilers," not waiting for violence to happen.

Recent evidence from UN peace operations in Haiti, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Liberia suggests this lesson has been at least partly learned. The UN has acted aggressively against spoilers in all those countries, although a growing problem is whether troop contributors are willing to allow their troops to participate in robust military actions in the context of a peace operation.

Could another Srebrenica happen? In this regard, the situation is much less encouraging. A 1999 report from Secretary-General

Kofi Annan on the massacre asserted, "The cardinal lesson of Srebrenica is that a deliberate and systematic attempt to terrorize, expel or murder an entire people must be met decisively with all necessary means." As obvious as this finding is, it is equally obvious that in relation to the situation in Darfur the response has fallen far short of the goal. A "deliberate and systematic attempt to terrorize, expel or murder an entire people" is precisely what is taking place in Darfur. Yet the response to Darfur by the international community, including the U.S., has been anything but decisive and has not drawn on the available means. African Union peacekeeping forces are largely incapable of stopping violence against civilians. Their mandate may not permit much of what must be done, but an equally important problem is that AU militaries lack the resources to do what is necessary. Darfur is a big place, meaning that effective action to stop those committing violence against civilians requires significant mobility, including combat air support. This is something only powerful militaries, such as those of NATO member states, can provide.

For those seeking NATO-like muscle for Darfur, the past provides a mixed message. In July 1995, RI President Emeritus (then President) Lionel Rosenblatt was traveling through the former Yugoslavia, trying to get the U.S. and the international community to ensure that Gorazde would not be allowed to fall like Srebrenica. Lionel wrote, "The only way to stop this is to draw the line at Gorazde and that means helping get the French troops to Gorazde by the only available means-U.S. helicopters." Today, humanitarian advocacy organizations are seeking to get NATO and/or U.S. assistance for the AU peacekeepers in Darfur, including vital air support. In 1995, the horror of Srebrenica finally prompted NATO action. Even worse horrors in Darfur have failed to prompt a similar response.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- The Bush Administration and Congress support efforts to build capacity to prevent the next Srebrenica by implementing the following steps: fully funding and permanently authorizing into law the State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization; working to revive the Global Peace Operations Initiative, which is stalled by bureaucratic infighting one year after the G8 Summit in Georgia, where it was announced; improving Defense Department abilities to assist UN and regional peacekeeping efforts; preparing for the necessity of taking a hard line against perpetrators of genocide and making the case to the American people that "Not on my watch" actually means something.
- The Senate take up the cause of UN reform in a bipartisan and constructive way likely to yield results. Rather than accepting the deeply flawed approach taken by the House of Representatives in the Hyde UN Reform Act, the Senate should embrace the Gingrich-Mitchell report, American Interests and UN Reform, as the basis for an achievable U.S. policy on UN reform.
- The Bush Administration publicly endorse the findings of the Gingrich-Mitchell report and support its use as a basis for constructive policy on UN reform.

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