



Cody Corliss: Thirty years ago, the world witnessed a genocide

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“Come down here, it’s safe! I’m with the Serbs!” Ramo Osmanović shouted to his son, his words captured on amateur video.

Ramo and many other Bosnian Muslim men had taken to the woods, attempting to reach Bosnian Muslim territory after the Bosnian Serb military captured Srebrenica in Bosnia and Herzegovina on July 11, 1995, 30 years ago tomorrow.

After Ramo was intercepted by Bosnian Serb forces, his captors forced him to call for others hiding, including his son. Father and son were executed, their remains recovered from a mass grave in 2008.

The nation fractured

Srebrenica was a sleepy village when Yugoslavia fractured along ethnic

lines in the early 1990s. As the conflict intensified following Bosnia and Herzegovina's declaration of independence, the United Nations Security Council declared Srebrenica a "UN safe area" in 1993. The Muslim-majority enclave was a roadblock for Bosnian Serbs seeking to form a contiguous Serb-dominated area within the country.

The Bosnian Serb army attacked in July 1995. Encouraged by preliminary success — and the international community's muted response — Radovan Karadžić, president of the self-proclaimed Republika Srpska, instructed his military to take the city. Documentary footage captured Bosnian Serb General Ratko Mladić triumphantly touring Srebrenica's empty streets.

Some 20,000 civilians fled to a United Nations base operated by Dutch peacekeeping forces just outside of town while others attempted to flee through the woods. The next day, General Mladić addressed the masses outside the UN base. Those wishing to leave would be transported to Bosnian Muslim territory, he told them. The women and children would go first.

Members of the Bosnian Serb military separated the Bosnian Muslim men and boys from their wives, children, and mothers. They bused the women and children to Bosnian Muslim territory and transported the men and boys to execution sites. Those who had tried to escape through the woods were captured and similarly executed.

During the Srebrenica genocide, the Bosnian Serb military killed over 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys from the city. In an effort to cover their crimes, the military exhumed and re-buried bodies in remote sites throughout the region. Thirty years later, 1,000 people remain missing.

The meaning of genocide

Many think genocide means the killing of many people, but it is a legal term for acts done with the intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group. The International Court of Justice found that genocide occurred in Srebrenica. As a war crimes prosecutor, I helped secure convictions of Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia for genocide and other crimes.

The Srebrenica genocide is certainly a story of calculated human evil, but it

is also about international failure. Genocide occurred in Srebrenica after the international community failed to stop a safe area from being overrun and failed to protect civilians after it was.

Thirty years after the events in Srebrenica, the families of the dead, flanked by foreign dignitaries, will again gather in memory. For commemoration to be truly meaningful on the international level, however, it requires more than public mourning. It demands vigilance.

The world continues to be plagued by humanitarian crises — most notably in Gaza and Sudan — with many arguing that both meet the criteria for genocide. Still, the international community and its leaders seem unwilling or unable to marshal the words, resources, and cooperation necessary to stop it.

A common refrain, of course, is that there's nothing we can do. Many argued that the Balkans had fallen apart and any common identity lost and irrecoverable, leaving everyone to fight for their place. The death of Yugoslavia's popular dictator had left a void for new politicians to exploit, emphasizing ethnic and religious differences. Besides, it was too small and too far away to be worth America's attention.

Citizen demand

Still, action lies not just in the halls of government, but in the voices of citizens who demand that we not look away. I'm reminded of international inaction in the face of another genocide in the mid-1990s, the Rwandan Genocide that claimed over 500,000 lives. As one U.S. senator later reflected, if each member of Congress had received just 100 letters from constituents seeking action, the American response would have been different.

Thirty years ago, Bosnian Muslims like Ramo Osmanović sought safety, only to have that hope shattered by those intending the destruction of the Bosnian Muslims of Srebrenica. Commemoration of that atrocity thirty years ago demands a continued commitment to prevent potential acts of genocide today.

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