

March 18, 2014

Statement Concerning the January 23, 2014 Desecration of the Stražište Memorial

By my presence in the Stražište Cemetery today in Višegrad, I condemn genocide denial in Republika Srpska and specifically condemn the removal of the word “genocide” from the memorial to the victims of the genocide in the Stražište Cemetery, a removal carried out by the municipal authorities in Višegrad on January 23, 2014. On that day, the authorities forcibly entered the Muslim cemetery and defaced the memorial by scraping the word “genocide” from the stone memorial. Under the circumstances, this was a cowardly and heinous act of desecration and denial.

In May 2012, sixty victims of the genocide were laid to rest in Stražište cemetery. Their human remains had been exhumed from the Drina River and Lake Perućac beginning in August 2010. At that time, repairs on a nearby dam had caused the river level to drop. It then became possible for the first time to find the victims who had been murdered on the Ottoman bridge and thrown into the river in 1992. Perhaps the perpetrators thought they had hidden the evidence of their crimes once and for all. However, due to the heroic efforts of Bosnia’s Missing Person’s Institute and the International Commission on Missing Persons, the bones of the victims were recovered from the riverbed. I accompanied the government exhumation team and I witnessed the discovery of the human remains. These were the victims who were laid to rest in the Stražište cemetery in 2012 when the memorial to the victims of the Višegrad genocide was installed.

When removing the word “genocide” on January 23, 2014, the local authorities suggested that they were operating under the “rule of law.” But they fail to recognize that their “rule of law” is discriminatory as well as a violation of human rights. Such a “rule of law” imposed by one ethnic group (Serb) upon another ethnic group (Bosniak or non-Serb) in Višegrad, is discriminatory in the same way that the Nuremberg Laws in Nazi Germany¹ discriminated “legally” against the Jews, and in the same way that the “Jim Crow Laws” in the United States² --from approximately 1876 to 1965-- discriminated “legally” against Black Americans. It should not escape our attention that the Bosnian Serb majority in Višegrad achieved its current political authority precisely as a result of the genocide that occurred from 1992-1995.

The “rule of law” that authorized the defacing of the Stražište memorial is clearly discriminatory in the sense that a monument to the perpetrators of the genocide stands prominently and undisturbed in the center of the town of Višegrad. Further, such a discriminatory “rule of law” is also operative elsewhere in Republika Srpska, since Bosnian Serbs have erected their own memorials, which are located provocatively nearby the sites of the concentration camps --such as the one at Trnopolje (Prijedor)-- while Bosniaks have been prevented from doing so.

The removal of the word “genocide” from the Stražište memorial is, moreover, a violation of every core human rights instrument regarding the fundamental human right to take part in the cultural life of one’s community. Such conventions must certainly protect the social and cultural practice of memorializing the victims of genocide in a private religious cemetery.

My colleagues and I (Sanja Seferović-Drnovšek, Chairperson, Bosnian American Genocide Institute and Education Center in Chicago IL; Prof. Emir Ramić, Chairman Institute for the Research of Genocide Canada; and Prof. Dr. Smail Čekić, Director, Institute for the Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law, University of Sarajevo), have proposed that one way to protect human rights regarding the preservation of cultural memory would be to recognize the sites of genocide, whether in Foča,

Omarska, Trnopolje, Višegrad, or elsewhere, as “national” properties, in the same way that the Potočari Memorial Cemetery has been established and preserved as a national site in memory of the victims of the Srebrenica genocide. By establishing these memorial sites as *national* lands, the survivors would be empowered to create memorials and commemorate the genocide in these specific “places of pain,”³ free of the denial and the suppression of the truth.

For their part, the authorities in Višegrad have signaled their insensitive and discriminatory intention to destroy the Pionirska House, which is the only existing “memorial” to the murder of innocent civilians by Bosnian Serb forces in Višegrad in 1992. In this case, the authorities are using the excuse of a road construction project to allow them to demolish and erase the only remaining evidence of the Pionirska and Bikavac crimes, crimes which the ICTY described as horrific, vicious, callous, brutal, and uniquely cruel.⁴

In the light of the documented suffering of the victims of the genocide in Višegrad, and of the victims throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, the actions and intentions of the authorities in Višegrad can be characterized as indecent and shameless. In addition, those actions and intentions can be identified as “apartheid.” Indeed, the *International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid* condemns “Any legislative measures and other measures calculated to prevent groups from participation in the political, social, economic and cultural life of the country and the deliberate creation of conditions preventing ... the right to freedom of movement and residence, the right to freedom of opinion and expression...”⁵ Recent reports indicate that such discriminatory practices in Republika Srpska are affecting non-Serbs in a number of other respects, including taxes, property rights, residency, voting rights, and psychological intimidation affecting the right of return. Those discriminatory practices are a primary impediment to human rights and restorative justice as well as to national and regional economic development.

Let us stand in solidarity today with those who endured the genocide, and in memory of the victims as we request that the international community recognize and undertake its *responsibility to protect*, through all appropriate diplomatic, political and legal avenues, the Bosniak and non-Serb populations who are subject to persecution, psychological intimidation and discrimination in Republika Srpska.

Let us request that all necessary measures be taken to hold the authorities in Republika Srpska accountable for crimes against humanity under international law for willfully persecuting and discriminating against Bosniaks and other non-Serbs in their effort to secure the goals of the genocidal aggression and exclusion that took place from 1992 to 1995.

Sincerely,

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Višegrad, March 18, 2014

¹ “The Nuremberg Race Laws.” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. Web. 18 March 2014.

² “Jim Crow Laws.” *Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site*. National Park Service. Web. 18 March 2014.

³ Halilovich, Hariz. *Places of Pain: Forced Displacement, Popular Memory and Trans-local Identities in Bosnian War-torn Communities*. Oxford: Berghann Books, 2013.

⁴ In the all too long, sad and wretched history of man’s inhumanity to man, the Pionirska street and Bikavac fires must rank high. At the close of the twentieth century, a century marked by war and bloodshed on a colossal scale, these horrific events stand out for the viciousness of the incendiary attack, for the obvious premeditation and calculation that defined it, for the sheer callousness and brutality of herding, trapping and locking the victims in the two houses, thereby rendering them helpless in the ensuing inferno, and for the degree of pain and suffering inflicted on the victims as they were burnt alive. There is a unique cruelty in expunging all traces of the individual victims which must heighten the gravity ascribed to these crimes. (From the ICTY Judgment Summary for Milan Lukić and Sredoje Lukić, 20 July 2009)

⁵ *International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid*, Article II (c), <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/apartheid-supp.html>