

The Honorable Ambassador Samantha Power
Permanent U.S. Representative to the United Nations
United States Mission to the United Nations
799 United Nations Plaza
New York, N.Y. 10017

Dear Madame Ambassador:

We are writing to express our concerns about the plans of the Višegrad municipality to destroy the Pionirska house, one of the houses in Višegrad where the Lukić cousins trapped approximately 60 innocent Bosniaks in the basement of the house and burned them alive. The municipality also plans to remove the term “genocide” from a memorial to the victims of the genocide that has been erected in the Muslim cemetery in Višegrad. The recent municipal order authorized these destructive actions to take place on December 24, 2013.

The Pionirska house was one of two sites in Višegrad where, in 1992, innocent civilians--predominantly women and children-- were forced into houses and burned alive. The ICTY called these crimes the “worst acts of inhumanity that a person may inflict upon others.” The Court continued:

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)

The house at the site of the Bikavac fire was completely destroyed. The only “memorial” to the victims of these heinous crimes stands today at the Pionirska site. That is the very memorial to the victims that the Višegrad municipality plans to destroy.

Further, in the summer of 2010, work on a nearby dam caused the level of the Drina River to drop. Bosnia’s Missing Persons Institute and the International Commission on Missing Persons were therefore able to exhume the human remains of victims who had been murdered on or around the Mehmed Paša Sokolović Bridge in Višegrad in 1992, and thrown into the river. On May 25th 2012, 60 of those victims who had been identified were buried in the Muslim Stražište cemetery. At that time, the memorial for the

victims of the genocide in Višegrad was erected in the cemetery. This is the only intentional memorial to the victims of the genocide in Višegrad.

Each of these sites (the Pionirska house and the Stražište memorial) serve to mark what Dr. Hariz Halilovich has called in his recent book “places of pain,” places that give form to the collective cultural memory of the genocide that was suffered by Bosniaks and other non-Serbs. The plan to destroy or deface these memorials is part of a systematic effort in Republika Srpska to deny the genocide.

It must be stated that similar efforts to deny and suppress the truth of the genocide are routinely practiced in the city of Prijedor and the surrounding area. The Mayor of Prijedor has attempted to prevent commemorative gatherings and has forbidden the use of the term “genocide.” Survivors of the concentration camps, for example, are only allowed to gather at the infamous Omarska camp one day each year. Further, survivors have been forbidden from erecting memorials at the sites of the former concentration camps. Bosnian Serbs, however, have erected their own memorials, which are located provocatively nearby the camps, such as the one at Trnopolje. In Višegrad, as well, a statue has been erected to the perpetrators in the middle of town, a statue that has become a gathering site for divisive ultranationalist rallies. Thus, the prohibition of memorials to the Bosniak victims in Višegrad and elsewhere reveals a policy of discrimination and apartheid in Republika Srpska.

It has not escaped our attention that what will probably be the largest mass grave to be exhumed since the end of the genocidal aggression was discovered in September 2013 at Tomašica, near Prijedor. Close to 500 victims have been found thus far. The grave covers an area of 5,000 square meters and is said to be 10 meters deep. A mass grave, a crime scene of this magnitude, could only have escaped attention this long due to the culture of denial and silence that permeates Republika Srpska.

We would like to propose that the only way to protect human rights regarding the preservation of cultural memory, as well as the right of return, would be to “federalize” these places of pain, whether in Foča, Prijedor, Trnopolje, Višegrad, or elsewhere, in the same way that the Potočari Memorial Cemetery was established and has been preserved in memory of the victims of the Srebrenica genocide. By establishing these memorial sites as federal, or as national property, the survivors would be empowered to create memorials and commemorate the genocide in these specific “places of pain,” free of the denial and the suppression of the truth.

We write to you now because of the current threat to the Pionirska house and to the Stražište memorial, but also because of the proliferation of efforts to intimidate and exclude non-Serbs from Republika Srpska. In recent months, for example, an ultranationalist billboard was installed in Vlasenica on the road to Srebrenica. The billboard bears the image of Ratko Mladic, as well as the message: “General, We are Waiting For You... Serb Vlasenica.” On the other side of the billboard, three phrases are visible: “Serb language, Serb Government, Orthodox Faith.”

These brutal actions to destroy or deface memorials to the genocide are part of a systematic effort in Republika Srpska to intimidate Bosniaks and non-Serbs who have returned to their former homes, and to prevent additional refugees from returning. Further, the destructive acts scheduled for December 24th will strike a decisive blow against efforts seeking justice and reconciliation. Such orchestrated efforts to intimidate Bosniaks from returning to Republika Srpska are a violation of Annex 7 of the Dayton Peace Accords. Annex 7 affirms “that refugees and displaced persons are permitted to return in safety, without risk of harassment, intimidation, persecution, or discrimination, particularly on account of their ethnic

origin,” and calls, moreover, for the prevention of any activities that would “hinder or impede the safe and voluntary return of refugees and displaced persons.” The intimidation of those who would seek to return to their former homes is, as well, a violation of the “right to freedom of movement and residence within the border of the State,” a human right affirmed by numerous core human rights instruments.

Finally, we write to you, because, in your book, “*A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*” you chronicled and lamented the reluctance of the United States to intervene to prevent genocide. You wrote: “...time and time again, decent men and women chose to look away” (xvi). We implore you, at this time, not to look away. We ask you to coordinate a diplomatic intervention, in the spirit of the doctrine of “the responsibility to protect,” to protect and preserve the Pionirska house and the memorial in Stražište cemetery.

We encourage you to organize a diplomatic effort to recognize the places of pain, the sites where Bosniaks and non-Serbs were incarcerated, tortured, raped and killed during the genocide, as national property or land, so as to protect and preserve those sites. Let us stand, finally, with the courageous returnees and activists in Višegrad as we affirm their fundamental human rights and confront ultranationalist efforts to continue the dehumanizing exclusion of Bosniaks and non-Serbs from Republika Srpska, exclusions that are nothing less than the continuation of the genocide that occurred between 1992 and 1995.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



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Prof. Dr. Smail Cekic, Director, Institute for the Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law, University of Sarajevo;

Mirsad Duratovic, President of the Association of Detainees "Prijedor 92";

Dr. Senadin Lavic, President, Bosniak Cultural Association, Sarajevo

New Haven, 22 December 2013

cc. Ambassador Valentin Inzko, High Representative, Office of the High Representative, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Ambassador Fletcher M. Burton, Head of Mission, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina