

The real story behind Srebrenica

By LEWIS MACKENZIE

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This week marked the 10th anniversary of the United Nations' second greatest failure since its creation in 1945 -- the genocide in Rwanda being the undisputed No. 1. With much fanfare, the ceremonies focused on the massacre of "up to" 8,000 Bosnian men and boys by General Ratko Mladic's Bosnian Serb army in Srebrenica in July of 1995.

In the vast majority of recent media reports, the background and responsibilities for the disaster in Srebrenica were absent. Preferred was the simple explanation: a black and white event in which the Serbs were solely to blame.

As someone who played a modest role in some of the events preceding the massacre, perhaps a little background will provide some context. In early 1993, after my release from the Canadian Forces, I was asked to appear before a number of U.S. congressional committees dealing with Bosnia. A few months earlier, my successor in the UN Protection Force, General Philippe Morillon, had --against the advice of his UN masters -- bullied his way into Srebrenica accompanied by a tiny contingent of Canadian soldiers and told its citizens they were now under the protection of the UN. The folks at the UN in New York were furious with Gen. Morillon but, with the media on his side, they were forced to introduce the "safe haven" concept for six areas of Bosnia, including Srebrenica.

Wondering what this concept would mean, one U.S. senator asked me how many troops it would take to defend the safe havens. "Somewhere in the neighbourhood of 135,000 troops," I replied. It had to be that large because of the Serb artillery's range. The new UN commander on the ground in Bosnia, Belgian General Francis Briquemont, said he agreed with my assessment but was prepared to try to defend the areas with 65,000 additional troops. The secretary-general of the day, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, went to the Security Council and recommended 27,500 additional troops. The Security Council approved a force of 12,000 and, six months later, fewer than 2,000 additional soldiers had been added to UNPROFOR for the safe-haven tasks.

Then the Security Council changed the wording of the safe-haven resolution from "the UN will defend the safe havens" to "by their presence will the UN deter attacks on the safe havens." In other words, a tiny, token, lightly armed UN contingent would be placed as sacrificial lambs in Srebrenica to "deter" the Bosnian Serb army.

It didn't take long for the Bosnian Muslims to realize that the UN was in no position to live up to its promise to "protect" Srebrenica. With some help from outsiders, they began to infiltrate thousands of fighters and weapons into the safe haven. As the Bosnian Muslim fighters became better equipped and trained, they started to venture outside Srebrenica, burning Serb villages and killing their occupants before quickly withdrawing to the security provided by the UN's safe haven. These attacks reached a crescendo in 1994 and carried on into early 1995 after the Canadian infantry company that had been there for a year was replaced by a larger Dutch contingent.

The Bosnian Serbs might have had the heaviest weapons, but the Bosnian Muslims matched them in infantry skills that were much in demand in the rugged terrain around Srebrenica. As the snow cleared in the spring of 1995, it became obvious to Nasar Oric, the man who led the Bosnian Muslim fighters, that the Bosnian Serb army was going to attack Srebrenica to stop

him from attacking Serb villages. So he and a large number of his fighters slipped out of town. Srebrenica was left undefended with the strategic thought that, if the Serbs attacked an undefended town, surely that would cause NATO and the UN to agree that NATO air strikes against the Serbs were justified. And so the Bosnian Serb army strolled into Srebrenica without opposition.

What happened next is only debatable in scale. The Bosnian Muslim men and older boys were singled out and the elderly, women and children were moved out or pushed in the direction of Tuzla and safety. It's a distasteful point, but it has to be said that, if you're committing genocide, you don't let the women go since they are key to perpetuating the very group you are trying to eliminate. Many of the men and boys were executed and buried in mass graves.

Evidence given at The Hague war crimes tribunal casts serious doubt on the figure of "up to" 8,000 Bosnian Muslims massacred. That figure includes "up to" 5,000 who have been classified as missing. More than 2,000 bodies have been recovered in and around Srebrenica, and they include victims of the three years of intense fighting in the area. The math just doesn't support the scale of 8,000 killed.

Naser Oric, the Bosnian Muslim military leader in Srebrenica, is currently on trial in The Hague for war crimes committed during his "defence" of the town. Evidence to date suggests that he was responsible for killing as many Serb civilians outside Srebrenica as the Bosnian Serb army was for massacring Bosnian Muslims inside the town.

Two wrongs never made a right, but those moments in history that shame us all because of our indifference should not be viewed in isolation without the context that created them.

Retired major-general Lewis MacKenzie was the first commander of UN peacekeeping forces in Sarajevo.

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