

Preface

Many reasons have been mentioned why the international community failed to protect the people of Srebrenica. The city was not defensible, the »safe area« concept untenable and the course of events unavoidable. The local combatants had launched attacks, violating agreements to lay down their arms. The Government of Bosnia had given up Srebrenica anyway. The UN administration and their peace keeping forces had made mistakes: bad coordination between commanders and insufficient armament. The Dutch Blue Helmets stood against heavy odds: the besiegers were numerous and better armed. Too many people were seeking refuge and the protection forces did not have a choice. By refusing full access to the camp, by sending people away and by cooperating with the besiegers in the separation of men, women and children, they had only tried to avoid chaos. How could they have known that Mladić had in mind to kill all men and boys?

These and other arguments are half-truths, or even less. So-called justifications of non-action were but poor excuses. The survivors of the massacre and their relatives insist on knowing the truth. They do not want to listen to arguments apportioning blame to others. They know, of course, who carried out the genocide, but they ask why the international community allowed this. In particular in the Netherlands, statements have been made holding everybody else responsible, but not the Dutch. Blame was put on the UN Security Council, NATO, France, the Government in Sarajevo, the headquarters of UNPROFOR, the Bosnian troops and even on the victims themselves.

The establishment of the Yugoslavia Tribunal has enabled the international community to put those who are guilty on trial. Mass murderers, perpetrators of the genocide and culprits behind the scenes have stood trial and are being sentenced. However, the responsibilities of the protectors were not under discussion. Those responsibilities are mainly political. In 2002 the Government of The Netherlands stepped down, following the publication of an officially mandated study about Srebrenica. Though widely understood as an act of statesmanship, this decision was not based on the recognition of co-responsibility as protectors. On the contrary, the study that had led to this decision concluded quite the opposite.

Recently questions concerning political and legal responsibilities have been raised again. Is the UN always immune to the actions of the peace keepers? Are Blue Helmets solely the responsibility of the UN, or also of the country where they come from? Can survivors and relatives hold UN peace keepers responsible in civil proceedings? These are valid and urgent questions. Following the adoption of the Principle of the Responsibility to Protect by the General Assembly of the United Nations a new debate is necessary. However, the most penetrating questions are neither political nor legal. These are the life or death questions of the people concerned: Why did you not keep your promises? Why did you break with guaranteeing our safety? Why did we have to surrender our arms, depriving us of the one and only possibility to protect ourselves? Did this not imply an obligation on your side to go to any lengths to protect us? Why did you separate us from our husbands, fathers and sons? How have they been killed and where? Where are their bodies?

These questions have been asked time and again. They still are. Though inconvenient, they have to be listened to. They should be recognized as valid and be heard. They deserve an answer. Silence is neglect.

To answer that it was a long time ago and that life goes on would be to repeat the failures of the past. Those who lost their loved ones would feel this as betrayal. Answers repeating a denial of responsibility are beside the point. The survivors and their relatives are not convinced by mere legal answers. They seek justice, but also solidarity. They have a right to ask why the world allowed the slaughter, and to repeat the question when the answers reveal that they are not being taken seriously.

The book of Srebrenica cannot be closed. The victims will not forget what happened and they will recall events, also after the perpetrators have been tried. The story will have to be told and retold, by the spoken or with the written word and with images, during commemorations of the dead and in classrooms, as long as the survivors and their children demand this.

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