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Srebrenica Genocide

Mr. Smith of New Jersey. Madam Speaker, this week, the world pauses to remember and reflect on the Srebrenica genocide, horrific acts of brutality, wanton cruelty, and mass murder committed in Srebrenica beginning July 11, 20 years ago.

This week, we pause to honor those brave Bosniaks who suffered and died, victims of genocide. This week, the people in the United States and men and women of goodwill throughout the world again extend our deepest condolences and respect to the mothers and surviving family members who have endured unspeakable sorrow and loss that time will never abate. And this week, the international community must recommit itself to justice, once and for all, for those who perpetrated these heinous crimes.

Today, Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic are incarcerated, awaiting final disposition of their cases before the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia for multiple counts of genocide, crimes against humanity, and violations of laws and customs of war.

Twenty years ago, Madam Speaker, an estimated 8,000 people were systematically slaughtered by Bosnian Serb soldiers in the United Nations-designated “safe haven” area of Srebrenica. They killed Muslim women

and children, but especially sought out and murdered adult males in that area.

These brutal killings were not committed in battle. They were committed against people who were unarmed and helpless and who had been repeatedly assured by Dutch peacekeepers that they would not be harmed if they surrendered.

The evidence is overwhelming that the executions were committed with the specific intention of destroying the Bosnian Muslim population of that area. This intention is the central element in the crime of genocide.

The U.N. peacekeeping forces in Srebrenica were charged with enforcing Security Council Resolution 836, which had pledged to defend the safe areas with “all necessary means, including the use of force.”

But when the moment of truth came, the U.N. forces offered only token resistance to the Serb offensive. Their military and political commanders had redefined their primary mission not as the protection of the people of Srebrenica, but as the safety of the U.N. forces themselves.

When Bosnian Serb Commander Ratko Mladic threatened violence against the blue-

helmeted soldiers here is the way one of those soldiers described the reaction. And I quote him: “everybody got a fright. You could easily get killed in such an operation. As far as I knew, we had not been sent to Srebrenica to defend the enclave, but, rather, as some kind of spruced-up observers.”

So that is what the peacekeepers became: observers to genocide. Soon they became something more than observers: enablers. On July 13, the Dutch blue-helmet battalion handed Bosnian Muslims who had sought safety within the U.N. compound over to the Serbs. They watched as the men were separated from the women and children, a process which was already well known in Bosnia—it was at the time—as a sign that the men were in imminent danger of being executed. These men were never heard from again.

At one congressional hearing I chaired in March of 1998—and I had six of them—Hasan Nuhanovic, the indigenous translator working for the U.N. peacekeepers in Srebrenica, testified. He was there in the room. Hasan lost his family in the genocide. He was there when Mladic and the commanders of the Dutch peacekeepers talked about the terms.

Here is what he told my panel, in part:

“On July 12, the day before the fall of Srebrenica, the Bosnian Serb Army commander, General Ratko Mladic, requested a meeting with the Dutchbat commander, Lieutenant Colonel Karemans, and local representatives of Srebrenica in the nearby town of Bratunac outside the enclave . . . During the meeting, Mladic assured the Dutch and local delegation that no harm would come to the refugees in Potocari . . .

“Upon returning to the camp, three local representatives are ordered by Dutchbat deputy commander, Major Franken, to prepare a list of all males, all men and boys between the ages of 16 and 65 among the refugees inside and outside the camp. The list of the males among the 6,000 inside the camp was completed the same day . . .

“On July 13, the Dutch ordered 6,000 refugees out of the Potocari camp. The Serbs were waiting at the gate, separating all males from the women and children. Major Franken stated that all the males whose names were on the list would be safe . . . I watched my parents and my brother being handed over to the Serbs at the gate. None of them have been seen since.

“I want to explain here that the people hoped that the Dutch were going to protect them, the U.N. peacekeeping troops and all other members of all other organization who were present in Srebrenica who were inside the camp, the people hoped that they would be protected, but the Dutch soldiers and officer gave no other option to the refugees but to leave. So the refugees inside were told to leave without any other choice. My family was told on the evening of 13 July that they should leave. About 6 p.m., there were no more refugees inside the camp.

“I don’t know if this is the topic of the meeting or hearing, but the same night the Dutch soldiers had a party inside the camp because they received two or three trucks full of beer and cigarettes. They played music while I was sitting, not knowing what happened to my family.”

As he went on to say later, they had all been slaughtered.

In July of 2007, Madam Speaker, I visited Srebrenica, where, together with my good friends President Haris Silajdzic and the Grand Mufti of Bosnia, Reis Ceric, I spoke at a solemn memorial service and witnessed the internment of hundreds of wooden coffins of newly discovered victims of the genocide.

It was a deeply moving experience to see 12 years then after the genocide— now it is 20 years—families still grieving loved ones whose bodies were being identified, often miles from the killing sites, as Serb forces, trying to hide the evidence of their crimes, moved the bodies of their victims.

For the record, 10 years ago—in 2005—the House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed H. Res. 199, which I authored, which clearly and unambiguously condemned the Srebrenica massacre for what it was: genocide.

That resolution was a landmark in the recognition of the Srebrenica massacre as a genocide. Two years later the verdict of the International Court of Justice found the same, in confirming the ruling of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

Today the international community is nearly unanimous when it proclaims that the Srebrenica massacre was a genocide. The resolution today, of course, supports that as well.

Astonishingly, Madam Speaker, there are some genocide deniers. That is why this resolution condemns statements that deny that the massacre at Srebrenica constituted genocide. Just last weekend Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska, asserted that the Srebrenica genocide is a lie.

Madam Speaker, just as it is doing in Ukraine, Russia is utilizing misinformation and historical revisionism in an attempt to destabilize Bosnia and the Balkan region. Today Russia vetoed a British U.N. Security Council resolution that reaffirms that Srebrenica was a genocide.

Russia has encouraged Serbia itself to protest the resolution and emboldened genocide denialism in the Republika Srpska, one of Bosnia's two constituent entities.

Madam Speaker, this resolution also encourages the administration to fulfill other neglected responsibilities. In particular, it urges the Atrocities Prevention Board to study the lessons of Srebrenica and issue informed guidance on how to prevent similar incidents from recurring in the future.

As you may know, the Atrocities Prevention Board is a U.S. interagency committee established by the administration in 2012 to flag potential atrocities. However, since its creation, the board has been marked by inaction and a complete lack of transparency.

This is unacceptable, especially as conflicts with disturbing parallels to Bosnia before the genocide continue to fester in Syria, the Central African Republic, Burma, and in Burundi.

Africa, in particular, would stand to benefit from a more active board. The conflict in Burundi is currently at a tipping point, and it absolutely needs attention.

Madam Speaker, despite the need for much greater atrocities prevention in U.S. policy, there have been many promising developments in the Balkan region, and this needs to be underscored.

In particular, I would note that Serbia today is not the Serbia of the Slobodan Milosevic era. That era was marked by nationalist aggression against neighboring countries and peoples, as well as considerable repression at home.

One of those who testified at one of my hearings on Serbia, Curuvija, a great young leader, was murdered on the second day after our bombing began by Serbian people. And the persons who did that have now been held to account. So what has happened there—thankfully, there have now been significant changes in Serbia.

I want to thank my colleagues. I do hope we will have a strong show of support for this resolution.

I reserve the balance of my time.