

## International

# Srebrenica widows agonize over the dead and missing

## 'I still think he's alive somewhere'

**SREBRENICA:** Fatima Mujic prays every day for the husband and three sons killed in the genocide against Bosnian Muslims that unfolded over several summer days in the town of Srebrenica 25 years ago. But she hesitates each time, thinking of her eldest son Refik, who has still not been found a quarter-century after the massacre. "I still think he's alive somewhere. I know about the others, but when I pray for him my hands start shaking, I don't know what to do," the 75-year-old widow told AFP. Her loved ones were among some 8,000 Muslim men and boys who were killed by Serb forces in the eastern enclave towards the end of Bosnia's 1992-95 war, an atrocity deemed a genocide by international courts. Mujic's husband and two of her sons, whose remains were found in mass graves after the conflict, were buried a decade ago in the memorial centre where more than 6,600 victims of the victims lie.

Another 237 have been laid to rest at other sites. But more than 1,000 people have never been found, an acute source of pain for survivors. Mujic, who now lives in a village near Sarajevo, says she "lives for the call" that the remains of Refik have been unearthed. But a decade has passed since the last of 84 mass graves was discovered. "Since July 2019, the remains of only 13 victims have been found," said Emza Fazlic, spokesperson for the Missing Persons Institute. A lack of new information and witnesses has hampered the search, she said.

### 'Don't leave me'

Ahead of the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the massacre on Saturday, Mujic re-

calls the last time she saw her children. She was among thousands of women, children and elderly who had gathered in front of a UN base outside of Srebrenica after Serb troops over-ran the Dutch soldiers who had been protecting the Muslim enclave, deemed a "safe haven" at the time.

Under the command of Bosnian Serb military leader Ratko Mladic, men and boys were taken away and summarily killed. Mujic recalls how her youngest son, 16-year-old Nufik, "hung on to me and said, 'Mum, don't leave me.'" "I stroked his curly hair and said 'I won't leave you,'" she remembers. "They took him, I followed them. I don't know if they hit me, but I don't remember anything," she said. Her two other sons and her husband tried to flee into the forest but were captured.

### 'Black soil'

Another widow, 71-year-old Mejra Djogaz, has decided to spend the rest of her days in the place where her life "stopped". She lives in a house a stone's throw away from the memorial in Srebrenica, which now lies in a Serb-dominated half of Bosnia, a legacy of ethnic cleansing during the war that left lasting divides between Bosnia's Serb, Muslim and Croat communities.

Every morning, when she goes out to water the flowers on her patio, she sees thousands of white gravestones that fan out in straight rows across the green lawns of the memorial. Her two sons Omer and Munib lie there. They were 19 and 21 years old. "I no longer have a reason to live. I take care of the flowers so I don't go crazy, but my flowers are in black soil," says the woman whose third son, Zuhdija, who was 20, and her

## Srebrenica: Three-year siege ends in massacre

**SARAJEVO:** Srebrenica suffered a three-year-long siege, culminating in a massacre, which has come to symbolize the Bosnian Serbs' policy of "ethnic cleansing" during the Balkan country's 1992-1995 war. Key dates:

### First fall

Srebrenica, a mainly Muslim town in eastern Bosnia, falls to Bosnian Serb troops shortly after the start of the siege of the capital Sarajevo at the beginning of the war in April 1992. Other towns in the eastern Drina valley also fall to the troops, who are helped by paramilitary groups which have come in from neighboring Serbia. Driven out under a policy dubbed "ethnic cleansing", the Bosnian Muslims retake the enclave but at the end of the year it is again targeted by the Serbs, who cut off the road access.

### 'Safe area'

Between March and April in 1993 some 8,000 people are evacuated from the increasingly em-

battled enclave. Dozens are killed in bombardments by Bosnian Serb forces. On April 16, as the town comes under fire from tanks and artillery, the UN Security Council declares Srebrenica a "safe area", under the protection of UN and NATO forces. A ceasefire and demilitarization accord is signed the next day in Sarajevo under the auspices of the UN, but it is never respected. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) channels foodstuffs and other necessities into the town, which is now a protected zone. In May the UN creates five other safe areas, Sarajevo, Tuzla, Zepa, Gorazde and Bihac. On March 1, 1994, a contingent of around 450 UN peacekeepers is deployed to the enclave where the rotation of UN soldiers had previously been held up. Dutch troops take over from Canadian peacekeepers.

### Final offensive

In early July 1995, the Bosnian Serb forces attack Muslim government positions to the south, east and north of the enclave. They take control of the peacekeepers' positions on the 9th, after seizing some 30 blue berets. Bosnian Serb tanks are by then less than two kilometres from the town. On July 11, NATO carries out airstrikes on two Serbian tanks on the outskirts of Srebrenica. However, on the morning of July 11, 1995, the Bosnian Serb army of Ratko Mladic overruns Srebrenica, causing tens of thousands of refugees to flee to the Dutch force's compound at Potocari on the hilly town's outskirts. — AFP



**POTOCARI:** A picture shows tombstones of victims of the massive killing of Srebrenica during Bosnia's 1992-95 war, at Potocari memorial center, near Srebrenica. — AFP

husband Mustafa, were killed earlier in the war during a 1992 siege of Srebrenica. "My sons didn't hurt anyone, they didn't stand in the way of an ant. I only wonder why they killed my children? They were our neighbors," Djogaz laments.

### 'A beautiful child'

Ramiza Gurdic, 67, also wonders about the

men who killed her sons and her husband: "Did they have children?" Her two children, Mehruddin and Mustafa, were 17 and 20. Before fleeing into the forest with their father, the eldest smoked a cigarette and rolled another one. "Mother, I will never see you again," he told her. "The youngest didn't say anything," adds Gurdic. The remains of both boys were later found, but only "half of Mehruddin". — AFP

## Twenty-five years ago: Srebrenica massacre

**SARAJEVO:** Twenty-five years ago, more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys were massacred at Srebrenica by Bosnian Serb troops, in one of the darkest chapters of the break up of Yugoslavia. The worst massacre in Europe since World War II, it was classed as genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). It marked a turning point in the war in Bosnia, the most ethnically-mixed of Yugoslavia's six republics. Muslims, Serbs and Croats battled each other from 1992 to 1995, leaving nearly 100,000 people dead and 2.2 million others displaced. Things to know about the massacre:

### Enclave falls

Besieged by Bosnian Serb forces from the beginning of the conflict, the eastern mainly-Muslim town of 148 square kilometers was declared a "safe area" by the UN in April 1993. UN peacekeepers were deployed. On the morning of July 11, 1995, the Bosnian Serb army of Ratko Mladic finally overran Sre-

brenica, however, causing tens of thousands of refugees to flee to the Dutch UN peacekeeping force's compound at Potocari on the hilly town's northern outskirts. The peacekeepers and about 5,000 refugees, mostly women and children, retreated into the UN base, while thousands of others gathered outside. The refugees inside the base were eventually expelled into the hands of waiting Bosnian Serb troops, who started forcibly bussing people out, separating the men and boys from the women.

### Massacre

In the following days more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys were systematically butchered by the Bosnian Serb forces under Mladic's command and their bodies dumped in mass graves. Hundreds of men who fled into the surrounding forests were rounded up and shot. Most of the mass graves were later dug up with bulldozers and the bodies removed to hide the scale of the crime. Witness accounts quickly emerged, collected by aid organizations from escapees who recounted the atrocities of Mladic's men. A total of 51 convictions have been made, 20 for genocide, by international courts and those in Bosnia and Serbia. The highest-ranking Bosnian Serb political leader, Radovan Karadzic, was sentenced to life in prison on appeal in March 2019. — AFP