

## THE STORY OF SREBRENICA

This is a short summary of the terrible events at Srebrenica in July 1995.

'Srebrenica is a small town in eastern Bosnia and sits between Serbia, Croatia and Montenegro in South-East Europe. Bosnia used to be part of the country known as Yugoslavia. It has a mixed population of Catholic Christians, Eastern Orthodox Christians and Muslims. These religions also link to other identities. Catholic Christians tend to be Bosnian Croat. Orthodox Christians tend to be Bosnian Serb, while Bosnian Muslims are known as Bosniaks (and are referred to as such hereafter). It is a complex and diverse social setting.

These communities have lived alongside each other for hundreds of years. For a long time from the Second World War until the 1990s they lived together in relative peace, and communities often seemed integrated.

Following the death of the Communist leader of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, in 1980, tensions between the different groups began to grow, leading to the formation of Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia as we know them today. The conflicts continued, despite the birth of these nations. As a result nationalist agitation among the mixed Croat, Serb and Bosniak population within Bosnia, violence turned to a war that lasted from 1992-1995.

There was violence across the country, and the capital, Sarajevo, endured the longest ever military siege, 1,425 days or nearly four years. Children who started school in year 7 would have been almost finished with year 10 by the time the siege was lifted and they could walk safely through the streets again.

During the conflict war crimes were committed on all sides, and **processes of ethnic cleansing – the removal of one ethnic group from a particular area** – were carried out.

The Bosniak community, however, suffered worst from atrocities perpetrated against them. Ethnic cleansing was at its most severe in the east and north of Bosnia where Bosnian Serb nationalist forces committed crimes against the Bosniak population.

In the east, Bosnian Serb nationalist forces besieged the town of Srebrenica. The people inside the town were mostly Bosniaks. In 1993, the United Nations declared Srebrenica a safe zone, but in July 1995 Bosnian Serb forces attacked the town. The Dutch UN troops, there to protect the town failed to stop the assault.

Inside the town there was chaos. Some people retreated to a battery factory at a place called Potočari where the Dutch soldiers were based. Up to 15,000 men and boys who did not believe that the Dutch would protect them chose instead to try to walk through the hills to reach another safe zone with what remained of the Bosniak forces. The vast majority were unarmed.

At the Dutch base and without resistance from the UN troops, Bosnian Serb forces separated men and older boys from women and children, pretending that the men would be taken to a safe area to be exchanged. In fact they were driven to fields and large buildings nearby and killed. The men and boys who had left to walk through the hills also suffered terribly. Bosnian Serb forces entered the hills and attacked the unarmed men and boys who were trying to escape. Many were captured and then taken to nearby locations and executed.

In total, 8,372 men and boys are believed to have been killed in and around Srebrenica. The journey of those who tried to escape through the hills became known as the 'Death March'. After they had committed their crimes, the genocidaires worried that their acts of genocide would be discovered. They dug up the mass graves and reburied the people they had executed in hundreds of smaller sites to try to prevent the international community charging them with war crimes.

Through the work of organisations such as the Bosnia Missing Persons Institute and the International Commission on Missing Persons these efforts have been in vain. Many mass graves have been found and people given back their identities and buried. For many more relatives and survivors the wait goes on, even twenty years later, to find evidence of their loved ones and to be able to bury their bodies. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) ruled that the mass execution of Bosniak men and boys in Srebrenica constituted genocide. Key individuals such as Ratko Mladic, and the former Bosnian Serb President, Radzan Karadzic, are now on trial in the international criminal court at The Hague for war crimes. The impact of the genocide continues to haunt Srebrenica, despite the capture of some individuals.

The mothers and relatives of those who died continue to fight for justice. Every year many more bodies are identified and buried. These events are marked on the European Union mandated Srebrenica Memorial Day on 11 July.'

(Text taken from Remembering Srebrenica Assembly material)

### **Things to think about:**

1. What does ethnic cleansing mean?
2. Why is this considered a genocide? What does genocide mean?
3. What role, if any, can we play in ensuring genocide never happens?
4. Can you think of other places where genocide has taken place/is taking place?