

Report on Impunity Watch Expert Debate

1 July 2009, Amsterdam: Remembering the Srebrenica and Rwanda genocides: Do war memorials unite or divide?

Providing victims and survivors with a sense of justice and recognition should be the predominant role of war memorials - this was the conclusion of an expert debate on memorialisation of the Srebrenica and Rwanda genocides, held on 1 July 2009 at Amsterdam's De Balie centre. The gathering, organised by Impunity Watch in association with the Anne Frank Stichting, and moderated by Kees Biekart, a senior lecturer at the Institute for Social Studies, sought to examine the potential of monuments to victims of grave human rights abuses to unite or divide societies in the aftermath of war, conflict or other serious division.

The panel was unanimous in strongly cautioning against conferring a role of reconciliation on memorials, particularly in relation to Rwanda and Srebrenica, where the immediate ramifications of genocide are still very much felt. Dion van den Berg of IKV-Pax Christi, presenting the situation in Srebrenica, pointed out that the remains of victims are still being discovered and identified, with around 500 burials due to take place this year on July 11. Impunity Watch's research coordinator, Klaas de Jonge, who spent a number of years working in post-genocide Rwanda, described the highly emotive situation there, where huge piles of human remains stand in the open, a shocking reminder of the slaughter of 800,000-1 million people that took place in 1994.

Holocaust historian Dienke Hondius reminded the participants that, in Germany, the process of commemorating the shocking abuses of World War Two did not get underway until a decade after it ended, and that this process is still developing to this day. In that respect, we should not have unrealistic expectations of communities in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. Rather, adequate time must be allowed before victims are asked or expected to deal with perpetrator and bystander groups, and antagonistic situations involving the latter should be avoided.

There, the process of identifying victims and establishing what happened is a crucial first step. In Rwanda, while the use of ethnic denominations is now banished, Hutu killed by their kinsmen for trying to protect their Tutsi neighbours have no place in genocide memorials, for fear of undermining the specificity of that crime. In the former Yugoslavia, ethnic groups have yet to acknowledge and condemn the crimes committed against others, which means that those memorials which do exist are erected separately by them for 'their own victims,' while those of other groups are ignored and on occasion sabotaged.

Here, Natasa Kandic, director of the Humanitarian Law Centre, a Serbian NGO, cited the fact that, although each year more and more young people travel from Serbia to pay their respects at the Srebrenica memorial at Potocari, the site of the fallen UN safe haven that now lies within Bosnia-Herzegovina's Serb-dominated entity, Republika Srpska, Bosnian Serbs themselves refuse to visit it. The challenge therefore is to build linkage between memorials and the societies or groups seen as responsible for the crimes they relate to, including subsequent generations, and thereby to make history visible and create a culture of remembrance.

Kandic expressed her hopefulness for progress in this regard: her organisation, along with

counterparts from other war-affected countries in the Western Balkan region, have initiated a regional commission to establish the facts about crimes committed during the violent dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, in an attempt to counteract widespread disinterest and revisionism. They hope that this will facilitate the acknowledgment and respect sought by victims as a fundamental part of their healing process, as well as an important measure of non-recurrence.

De Jonge was less hopeful about Rwanda, where he sees a strongly authoritarian government globalising Hutu guilt and thereby creating new grounds for ethnic tension. David Diaz of Amnesty International, who also spent time in Rwanda, pointed out however that the task facing the Rwandan government in the aftermath of the conflict was immense, as well as the fact that many Hutu imprisoned for their part in the genocide have yet to go through a process of self-criticism and recognise what they were responsible for.

The panel also discussed how the role of the international community in both conflict has affected the way in which crimes are being dealt with: while the international community did intervene to an extent in the Balkans, it did nothing in reaction to the Rwandan genocide, thus leaving it with much less leverage in relation to the transitional justice processes later enacted there.

There was a call for the international community to examine its role in relation to both conflicts, acknowledge its shortcomings and learn lessons for the future. Here, outgoing European Parliament delegate Jan Marinus Wiersma condemned the differentiation made between Europe and Africa, and emphasised that the recent recommendations issued by the parliament in relation to Srebrenica were made not only to the Netherlands, which holds special responsibility for the fall of the enclave and the genocide that followed, but to the entire European Union.

When it comes to memorialisation, it is important that the international community supports existing dynamics, but resists imposing its own solutions, said Diaz. In this regard, Van den Berg urged greater and more creative support to local civil society, including through the EU's conditionality mechanisms. Moreover, memorialisation should be seen as just one part of a broader effort to move forward from a traumatic event, and should go hand in hand with ambitious, complementary efforts in the spheres of transitional justice, education and development. If this is not the case, we cannot expect too much of memorials or that they alone are capable of achieving truth, justice and reconciliation.

Panel:

Klaas de Jonge, Impunity Watch Research Coordinator for the African Great Lakes Region

Dion van den Berg, Senior Policy Advisor, IKV- Pax Christi

Jan Marinus Wiersma, Member of the European Parliament, Partij van de Arbeid

Nataša Kandic, Humanitarian Law Center, Executive Director

Dienke Hondius, Associate Professor of Contemporary History, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

David Diaz, Deputy Director of the Europe and Central Asia Programme, Amnesty International

Moderator:

Kees Biekart, Senior Lecturer, Institute of Social Studies

This debate was the first in a series on the topic of memorialisation and its role in the combat of impunity for grave human rights abuses, and forms part of a developing Impunity Watch project on the topic, within its comparative Perspectives programme.

Concluding the event, Impunity Watch's director, Marlies Stappers, suggested that future memorialisation debates could look in more detail at the role of civil society, politicisation and political context, and interpretation of the role of bystanders to grave crimes.