



The Hague Institute
for Global Justice

*International Decision-Making
in the
Age of Genocide:
Srebrenica 1993-1995*

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International Decision-Making in the Age of Genocide: Srebrenica 1993-1995

Conference in The Hague, June 29 – July 1, 2015

Executive Summary

Leading decision-makers from more than a dozen countries gathered in The Hague from June 29 to July 1, 2015, to consider the failure of the international community to protect the United Nations “safe area” of Srebrenica, resulting in the largest massacre in Europe since World War II. Participants included three former members of the UN Security Council, senior government and UN officials, peacekeepers, and eyewitnesses to the Srebrenica tragedy.

Over the course of four working sessions, a public event, and numerous informal meetings, conference participants focused on a disastrous two-year chain of events that culminated in the fall of Srebrenica in July 1995. They examined the origins of the “safe area” policy, beginning with the March 1993 visit to Srebrenica by French General Philippe Morillon, and disagreements on how to implement frequently impractical Security Council resolutions. The discussion revealed sharp disconnects between the policy-makers in New York, the peacekeepers on the ground, and the people the “safe areas” were ostensibly designed to keep safe.

“I saw this conference as a kind of truth commission,” said Srebrenica survivor Muhamed Duraković. “Twenty years on, we cannot bring back the dead, but we can learn from what went wrong in Srebrenica. If we are not able to go through the process of fact-finding, truth, and reconciliation, we may be creating problems for future generations.”

At the heart of the international failure in Srebrenica in July 1995 was the inability of the major powers to devise and implement an agreed strategy for ending the defining conflict of the immediate post-Cold War era. The collapse of the Vance-Owen peace plan in the spring of 1993 left behind a policy vacuum that was not filled until the aftermath of Srebrenica with the American-led diplomatic initiative

that resulted in the Dayton peace agreement. In the judgment of European negotiator Carl Bildt, “unserious, pretend policy” was “a recipe for future disaster. The disaster came in Srebrenica in July 1995.” Other participants lambasted what they depicted as “fake policy” (White House official Jenonne Walker), “fake action by the Security Council (Netherlands defense minister Joris Voorhoeve), and the absence of any coherent political strategy for ending the Bosnia (UK ambassador to the UN David Hannay).

Unable to agree on a workable peace plan, western leaders adopted a mix of stop-gap measures designed to create the impression of “doing something when, in fact, we were not willing to do anything seriously,” according to Jenonne Walker. “We thought it was folly to call something a Safe Area that we had no means or intent of keeping safe. But we [Americans] had zero political or moral credibility because we were not willing to participate ourselves.”

The International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia has ruled that the killings and mass expulsion of Muslims from Serb-controlled territories in eastern Bosnia constituted a genocide under the definition of the 1948 Genocide Convention. While there have been numerous international inquiries into the Srebrenica events, the conference in The Hague marked the first convening of key players for a discussion guided by primary source materials, including UN cables and recently released diplomatic memos.

Insights emerging from the two and a half days of conversation included the following:

- *Lack of a clear mandate.* UN Secretariat official Shashi Tharoor criticized the Security Council for allowing a peacekeeping operation to morph into a peace enforcement operation. He said the operation failed because of the lack of a “coherent, clear, implementable mandate” and the requisite “political will” to enforce the mandate.

- *Overselling the Mission.* Security Council member Diego Arria said that the term UNPROFOR was a misleading misnomer. “With such a grandiose name, United Nations Protection Force, we thought that something would be done,” he said. “We discovered that this was not the case.”
- *Distorted human rights reporting.* Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights John Shattuck said his bureau was “constantly sidetracked” for attempting to draw attention to human rights violations, for fear of undermining sensitive diplomatic negotiations.
- *Intelligence failures.* Dutchbat commander Thom Karremans complained of “a huge lack of useful intelligence” on Bosnian Serb intentions. UN officials feared that intelligence-gathering operations might compromise their neutrality.
- *The “hidden hand” of the Great Powers.* Netherlands prime minister Wim Kok said he was not informed about the decision of the United States, France, and Britain to implement an unpublicized “bombing pause” in June 1995, a month before the fall of Srebrenica. Memcons of telephone conversations between leaders of these key countries remain classified two decades after Srebrenica.
- *Lack of coordination between political leaders and military commanders.* UNPROFOR commander Rupert Smith said the UN operation in Bosnia was hamstrung by a failure to “apply the use of force to a particular political end.” He said that the required cooperation between the soldiers and the politicians was absent “until the very end when we managed to get it together in August 1995.”
- *The failure of deterrence.* Netherlands defense minister Voorhoeve said that air power could have deterred Bosnian Serb attacks on the safe areas, but the threat was never systematically applied, prior to August 1995. Participants agreed that the cumbersome “dual key” system of securing UN and NATO approval for air strikes hampered an effective response.

Introduction

"I would love for the current members of the [United Nations] Security Council to have been in The Hague to listen to our discussion." --Zeid Ra'ad Al-Hussein, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights



Group photo at The Hague Institute for Global Justice – Harmen de Jong

A wave of euphoria swept through western capitals during the years 1989 to 1991 with the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. It turned out to be short-lived. Hardly had communism been laid to rest than a new specter arose to haunt the world: ethnic nationalism. The toxic mix of identity politics, economic crisis, and unscrupulous politicians determined to hang on to power by any means appeared first in the Balkans.

During the Cold War, Marshal Josip Broz Tito had pulled off a skillful geopolitical tightrope act, balancing East against West, Muslims against Christians, Serbs against Croats. Dubbed “the last of the Habsburgs,” Tito suppressed the ethnic tensions resulting from the fratricide of World War II but failed to secure his own succession. By 1991, the Titoist model of “brotherhood and unity” between Yugoslavia’s six republics was already falling apart as his political heirs maneuvered for personal advantage. War broke out first in Slovenia, then in Croatia, and finally and most brutally in Bosnia.

The Bosnia war (March 1992-November 1995) became the emblematic crisis of the new post-Cold War era, establishing a pattern for future crises, from Rwanda to Ukraine to Syria. The worldwide ideological conflict that characterized the Cold War was replaced by a multitude of regional ethnic conflicts, some of which continue to this day. The war of ideas metastasized into wars of identity.

Just as Bosnia encapsulated the foreign policy challenges of the new era, the fall of the United Nations “safe area” of Srebrenica on July 11, 1995 can be viewed as the defining moment in the Bosnia crisis. The subsequent murder of more than 7,000 Muslim men and boys by the Bosnian Serb military was dramatic evidence of the failure of the international community to forge an effective response to the policy of “ethnic cleansing.” Srebrenica was neither the first nor the only massacre of its kind, but it was the largest and most horrifying. It served as the trigger for implementation of an entirely new approach to Bosnia by western governments, led by the United States. Declared a “genocide” by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague, Srebrenica helped set in motion a chain of events that resulted in the Dayton peace agreement of November 21, 1995.

To mark the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, former United Nations officials joined past and current government policy-makers from half a dozen countries for a round-table symposium in The Hague on “International Decision-Making in the Age of Genocide.” The conference, which took place between June 29 and July 1, 1995, was co-hosted by the Simon-Skjoldt Center for Prevention of Genocide of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and The Hague Institute for Global Justice, in cooperation with the National Security Archive of George Washington University. Participants included Special Representative of the UN secretary-general Yasushi Akashi, European peace negotiator Carl Bildt, the commander of UN forces in Bosnia, General Sir Rupert Smith, Srebrenica survivor Muhamed Duraković, and three members of the UN Security Council.¹ The wartime Bosnian government was represented by Hasan Muratović, the minister responsible

¹ For convenience and clarity, this report will refer to conference participants by their responsibilities in 1993-1995 rather than their current positions. See annex for a full list of attendees.

for relations with the international community, and Deputy Prime Minister Zlatko Lagumdžija.

Participants agreed that primary responsibility for the twin tragedies of Bosnia and Srebrenica rested with local actors, notably the architects of “ethnic cleansing.” But there was also broad consensus that events in Bosnia were shaped in part by the larger international context. Decisions taken in New York, Washington, London, Paris, Brussels, Bonn, and Moscow were analyzed closely in Sarajevo, Pale, Belgrade, and Zagreb. Transcripts of the debates in the Bosnian Serb assembly, or the diaries of Bosnian Serb commander General Ratko Mladić, who master-minded the July 1995 Srebrenica operation, reflect a high degree of sensitivity to the opinions and reactions of the international community, particularly during the early phase of the war.² In the words of David Harland, a UN civil affairs officer in Sarajevo and author of the 1999 UN report on Srebrenica, “the Serbs were very, very responsive to the perceived level of threat coming from NATO, and later from the Rapid Reaction Force. Whenever it seemed to them that the mandate [from the UN Security Council] was not clear enough to allow any serious threat to be used against them, they would probe further.” (See Edited Transcript, Session 1, page 54, henceforth described as T1-54.)³

The conference was the second in a series of conferences examining “International Decision-Making in the Age of Genocide.” A June 2014 conference on Rwanda, also in The Hague, revealed dramatic disconnects between the architects of the 1993 Arusha peace agreement, members of the UN Security Council, and the

² See, for example, [remarks by Ratko Mladić to RS assembly on May 12, 1992](#), arguing against the policy of ethnic cleansing advocated by other Bosnian Serb leaders. “I do not know how Mr. Krajišnik and Mr. Karadžić would explain this to the world. People, that would be genocide.” See also [August 6, 1995 comment by Mladić aide Milan Gvero](#) to RS assembly that the decision to capture Srebrenica was taken “when we assessed that the international community would not react immediately...we entered [the town] exclusively because of that.” Gvero linked the decision to capture Srebrenica with the failure of the international community to react to the Croatian capture of Western Slavonia, a Serb-controlled enclave of Croatia, on May 1-3, 1995.

³ The report is designed to be read in conjunction with the [edited transcript](#) (Session 1, Session 2, Session 3, Session 4, and Public Session).

peacekeepers on the ground.⁴ Differences of approach were apparent not only *between* different governments and international institutions, but *within* the same institution. Failures of communication and policy coordination created a political vacuum that was filled by killers and demagogues.

A similar dynamic was apparent in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995, prior to the launching of the diplomatic initiative that led to the Dayton agreement. In the case of Bosnia, the problem was not international indifference, but a multitude of Security Council resolutions and conflicting policies that proved impossible to implement. According to Swedish prime minister Carl Bildt, western governments adopted “an unserious, pretend policy” in Bosnia. The failure to agree on a coherent strategy for ending the war was “a recipe for future disaster. The disaster came in Srebrenica in July 1995.” [T5-5].

Methodology

The conference proceedings were described as “Rashoman-like” by Jamie Rubin, who served as senior advisor to US ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright. [T4-42] As in the classic Japanese movie, participants described events from their own, unique point of view, which frequently differed from the point of view of their fellow participants. The organizers sought to bring a broad range of perspectives and experiences to the table, while encouraging a relaxed, respectful conversation. Bosnian deputy prime minister Zlatko Lagumdžija expressed his disagreements with senior international officials across the table in ironic form. “I feel like a guinea pig who survived an experiment. I am honored to be here with the scientists who, let’s say, ‘helped us survive.’” [T1-34]

⁴ See [Rapporteur Report](#), Rwanda conference, The Hague, June 1-3, 2014.



Conference participants focused on a series of key moments that led, cumulatively, to the Srebrenica genocide, beginning with the designation of the largely Muslim-inhabited enclave as a UN “safe area” in early 1993. They were provided with a “briefing book” of declassified documents, including contemporaneous cables and memos collected from a wide variety of sources, such as ICTY, the UN, western governments, and private collections. In addition to refreshing the memories of participants concerning events that took place more than two decades ago, the primary source documents served as a historical record of the dilemmas they faced at the time and the rationales behind their actions. Several participants noted the need to avoid the benefit of hindsight and reconstruct the decision-making process as it unfolded in real time, in all its messy ambiguity.

The “International Decision-Making in the Age of Genocide” project uses the “critical oral history” methodology developed by the National Security Archive, previously used to study such events as the Cuban missile crisis, the Vietnam War, and the end of the Cold War. As conceived by Professor James Blight of the Balsillie School of the University of Waterloo (Canada), the critical oral history method involves “the simultaneous interaction, in a conference setting, of declassified documents on the

events under scrutiny, key officials who participated in the events, and top scholars familiar with the documents and events.”

Although there have been many inquiries into the Srebrenica tragedy, the present project was unique in several ways.⁵ The Hague conference marked the first convening of so many key players in the same room at the same time to review the international decision-making process. This is also the first time that the full primary source documentation underpinning an international inquiry into the Srebrenica events has been made available to readers. More than 300 documents cited in the conference transcript and rapporteur’s report, including many that have never been previously released, are listed in an annex, which can also be found at the websites of the sponsoring institutions.⁶

While the archival record is far from complete, the conference showed that it is possible to discuss one of the most painful episodes in recent European history on the basis of established facts.⁷ In the opinion of Srebrenica survivor Muhamed Duraković, such a discussion is vital if there is ever to be a true reconciliation process in the former Yugoslavia. During the Tito era, honest debate about the horrifying massacres and counter-massacres that took place in World War II was forbidden. When communism collapsed in 1991, ordinary people became easy prey for conspiracy theories and one-sided narratives. As Duraković explained:

In Bosnia, we live in a society with three ethnically divided groups, each with its own “truth.” If you talk to people from the Bosniak side, they will tell you what “really” happened. You then go over to the Serb side, and they will tell

⁵ See, for example, UN Secretary General, “The Fall of Srebrenica,” November 15, 1999, [A/54/549](#), henceforth “1999 UN report.” The Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD) published an [exhaustive report](#) in 2002, henceforth “2002 NIOD report.”

⁶ The documents can be found [here](#) on the website of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

⁷ Notable gaps in the archival record include French, British, and Netherlands government archives, which will shed light on cabinet discussions related to UNPROFOR, the protection of safe areas, and Bosnia policy in general. NIOD says that the primary source materials used in the production of its 2002 report are closed to scholarly research until at least 2022, citing a 20-year public release rule. The Clinton library has released [selected materials on Bosnia](#), as part of a joint 2014 initiative with the CIA and in response to FOIA requests from the National Security Archive, but many other materials remain closed. By contrast, most UN reporting is available for research through the database of the [International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia](#) and the [David Owen papers](#) at the University of Liverpool.

you what “really” happened. I always insist that we Bosnians must talk about facts. We’re not ready to talk about truth. Maybe the next generation will accept a truth that everyone will recognize. Before that happens, however, we have to talk about facts. What was really important for me at this conference was the documentation of every single fact that came up in our discussion. [T5-7]

I saw this conference as a kind of truth commission. Twenty years on, we cannot bring back the dead, but we can learn from what went wrong in Srebrenica [T5-8] ... What this means is that if we are not able to go through the process of fact-finding, truth and reconciliation, we may be creating problems for future generations. This is why this conference was very important for me. It represents another tool to break the cycle of violence... [T5-9]



Muhamed Duraković, R, with Larry Hollingworth

Turning Points

Conference participants were invited to examine international decision-making in Bosnia through the prism of the Srebrenica tragedy. The first day (Monday, June 29) was devoted to a discussion of the creation of “safe areas” in Bosnia by the UN Security Council. During the second day, participants looked at the collapse of the

safe area policy in July 1995. The choice of March 1993 as a starting point for the conversation was dictated by the expertise of the people around the table, the limited time available, and a desire on the part of the organizers to focus attention on the role of international actors rather than the origins of the Bosnia war. When the commander of UN peacekeeping forces in Sarajevo, General Philippe Morillon, told the largely Muslim inhabitants of Srebrenica on March 13, 1993 that they were “under the protection” of the United Nations, he changed the nature of international engagement in Bosnia. What had previously been a humanitarian relief operation to a besieged town in eastern Bosnia became a test of political and military wills between the Bosnian Serbs, the UN, and NATO.

Several attendees said that it was impossible to understand the events of 1993-1995 without reference to preceding events, including the “ethnic cleansing” operations of the early phase of the war. Prior to the war, many districts of eastern Bosnia along the Drina river border with Serbia had a majority Muslim population. (Srebrenica municipality, for example, was 73 per cent Muslim and 23 per cent Serb, according to the 1991 census.) A list of “strategic objectives” announced by Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić as early as May 1992 included the creation of an ethnically cohesive Bosnian Serb state and the “elimination” of the Drina River as a border between the Serb-inhabited parts of Bosnia and Serbia proper.⁸

The creation of the Srebrenica “safe area” also came against the background of the collapse of an international peace plan negotiated by special envoys Cyrus Vance and David Owen representing the United Nations and the European Community. The so-called Vance-Owen peace plan envisaged the division of Bosnia into 10 ethnically-based cantons, knitted together by a very weak central government. According to UK representative to the Security Council David Hannay, the Vance-Owen peace plan was effectively shelved in April 1993 as a result of vehement opposition from the Bosnian Serbs and lukewarm American support. [T1-23] Some American officials (e.g. US ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright) feared that the

⁸ See [Karadžić address](#) to Republika Srpska assembly, May 12, 1992.

plan would reward ethnic cleansing, while others (e.g. Secretary of State Warren Christopher) were concerned that it would be virtually impossible to enforce.

United Nations official Shashi Tharoor, who headed the Balkan unit of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), noted sharp disagreements within the international community over the establishment of a peacekeeping force for the former Yugoslavia. He reminded participants that UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali had been opposed to the creation of a peacekeeping force in the absence of a peace to keep. He cited the Stephen Stills song “If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with” to explain why Security Council members “took the one available mechanism, namely UN peacekeeping, and applied it to a situation for which it was manifestly not suited.” [T1-6] According to Tharoor, the contradictions that bedeviled UN peacekeeping in the former Yugoslavia were baked into the mission from the very beginning.⁹ The peacekeeping force was given the name UNPROFOR, meaning United Nations Protection Force, “When we were really not in the business of protecting anybody significantly.”

According to the author of the 1999 UN report, David Harland, the idea for “Safe Areas” was initially raised by Austria and Hungary in 1992, long before it was applied to Srebrenica. Harland recalled that UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogato had originally viewed the Safe Area concept as “an absolutely terrible idea which, if ever used, should be limited to simply protecting hospitals by arrangement.” He cited the evolution of the Safe Area concept as an example of “how international decisions are sometimes made. An idea enters into play and is shaped and changed. The fact that it entered into play as an idea to be discounted is something that sometimes gets forgotten as time goes by.” [T1-7]

As it turned out, the impetus for actually creating the “safe areas” came not from Vienna or New York or Paris or London but fast-moving events on the ground.

⁹ The United Nations Protection Force for the former Yugoslavia was set up under UN [Security Council Resolution 743](#) of February 21, 1992.

1. Morillon visit to Srebrenica, March 11-14, 1993

The Muslim-controlled eastern enclaves of Bosnia, particularly Srebrenica, were on the verge of starvation by March 1993. The Bosnian Serbs were blocking food supplies to Srebrenica, whose pre-war population of around 10,000 had swollen to more than 37,000 because of the influx of refugees.¹⁰ At the moment when the town seemed about to fall, the commander of UN peacekeeping forces in Bosnia, General Philippe Morillon, sought to break the stalemate by leading a humanitarian convoy to Srebrenica. He was prevented from leaving the besieged town by desperate residents who saw the UN as their only means of protection. In an attempt to talk his way out, Morillon decided to address the population from the window of UN headquarters in Srebrenica. UNHCR official Larry Hollingworth recalled what happened next.

I had no idea what he was going to say, no idea at all. He stood up and he said to the people, "I came here voluntarily. I came here to help you." He said, "I am now putting you under the protection of the United Nations." [At this point Morillon instructed Hollingworth to raise the blue and white UN flag] ...There was this enormous cheer from below. People were clapping and cheering and shouting and I thought to myself, "There's only eight of us here." [T1-10]

The scene was captured by a British cameraman, Tony Birtley, freelancing for ABC News. Footage of Morillon's bold promise was shown around the world, winning praise from editorial writers but causing consternation in the UN Secretariat. According to Shashi Tharoor, UN officials were unwilling to disavow Morillon because "we recognized that significant voices on the Security Council welcomed his statement. We wanted to see how we could interpret [the declaration] in a way that would keep us viable as a peacekeeping force which is what the Council wanted us to remain." Tharoor acknowledged that the UN response was not "very coherent," but "this was the set of balls with which we were juggling." [T1-18]

Events were assuming a momentum of their own.

¹⁰ See [Srebrenica municipality population study](#), January 11, 1994, BH Federation Statistical Institute. Srebrenica officials gave a false figure of 45,000 inhabitants to international organizations.

2. UN Security Council Resolution 819, April 16, 1993

The raising of the UN flag over Srebrenica by General Morillon confronted the UN Security Council with an unenviable choice, according to UK permanent representative David Hannay: “whether to disown him or support him.” Hannay said there was “absolutely zero enthusiasm for the Safe Area,” in the British government but Europeans were “not prepared to drop Morillon despite the fact that he had acted without any authority whatsoever.” [T1-35] UN Security Council resolution 819 was adopted by a vote of 15-0 on April 16, 1993. A principal sponsor of the resolution, Ambassador Diego Arria of Venezuela, said there was little difficulty securing Council agreement as “there were no commitments on the part of anybody.” The resolution was intended “*pour la galerie*, as the French would say” [for the public gallery]. [T1-26]

Bosnian deputy prime minister Zlatko Lagumdžija said the resolution was supported “with enthusiasm” in Bosnia because of the mention of Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which implied the existence of an enforcement mechanism.¹¹ [T1-35] Netherlands defense minister Joris Voorhoeve said the resolution failed to make clear what would happen if the parties failed to comply with the “demands” of the Security Council. “I would put Security Council Resolution 819... in the category of ‘fake’ actions,” said Voorhoeve. [T1-40] Voorhoeve’s comments were echoed by Tharoor, who said that UNSC 819 imposed “no new responsibilities on the international community” in the event of attacks on the safe area. According to Tharoor, “one of the fundamental problems we had throughout this operation is that diplomatic drafting conducted with great finesse and aplomb by very skilled diplomats served as an end in itself. It was not linked to operational realities on the ground.”

¹¹ The signatories invoked Chapter VII of the UN Charter to “demand” that the warring parties “[treat Srebrenica and its surroundings as a safe area](#)” which should be free from any armed attack or hostile act.” See UNSC Resolution 819, April 16, 1993, [S/RES/819](#).

Hannay acknowledged that UNSC resolution 819 and subsequent Safe Area resolutions were “never designed as anything other than a short term expedient.” [T1-41] They should have been “fitted into a wider political strategy” for ending the war, such as the Vance-Owen peace plan. Instead, according to Hannay, Safe Areas became a stop-gap substitute for Vance-Owen, even though it was much more limited in scope and intention. “The Safe Areas were an expedient that became a policy,” said Hannay. “That was a real disaster.”



Front lines in December 1994, showing UN Safe Areas in Bosnia

In hindsight, Lagumdžija described the proposed Vance-Owen arrangements as “not a dream scenario” but “a Disneyland” compared to the division of Bosnia into two entities under Dayton. [T1-46] Whether Vance-Owen could have been made to work remains an open question. While the Bosnian government agreed to the plan, under American pressure, the Bosnian Serb leadership rejected Vance-Owen in defiance of Serbian strongman Slobodan Milošević. According to Jenonne Walker, the NSC official in charge of Bosnia policy from 1993 to 1994, “we saw flaws in Vance-Owen but would have accepted it if the parties had....Our shame was not being willing to do anything to stop Serbian aggression—necessary, in my opinion to get agreement

on any plan. This shame was made much greater by urging our allies to take risks we would not join.”¹²

3. UN Security Council Resolution 836, June 4, 1993

Adopted on June 4, 1993 by a vote of 13-0 (Venezuela and Pakistan abstaining), UN Security Council resolution 836 extended the “safe area” regime to five other Muslim-held enclaves, including Sarajevo. In contrast to resolution 819, Security Council resolution 836 included an enforcement provision.¹³ The resolution authorized member states to “take all necessary measures, through the use of air power...to support UNPROFOR in the performance of its mandate.” It stipulated that such “self-defense” actions would be “subject to close coordination with the Secretary-General and UNPROFOR,” an ambiguous formula that led to endless misunderstandings and controversy.

Resolution 836 was passed over the strenuous objections of the UN Secretariat and UN peacekeepers on the ground who feared their neutrality would be compromised. In a June 3, 1993 cable to the UN Secretariat, UNPROFOR commander General Lars-Eric Wahlgren of Sweden said that the use of air strikes would “simply bring UNPROFOR and UNHCR operations to an end...One simply cannot make peace and war at the same time.”¹⁴ The UN Secretariat estimated that UNPROFOR would need 15,000 more troops to fully protect the six safe areas against “possible aggression,” an estimate later increased to 34,000 troops (in addition to the 24,000 troops already in theater.)¹⁵

Hannay dismissed such estimates as “a joke” designed to be shot down, the UN equivalent of the “Give me a half a million men and I will march on Moscow” option.

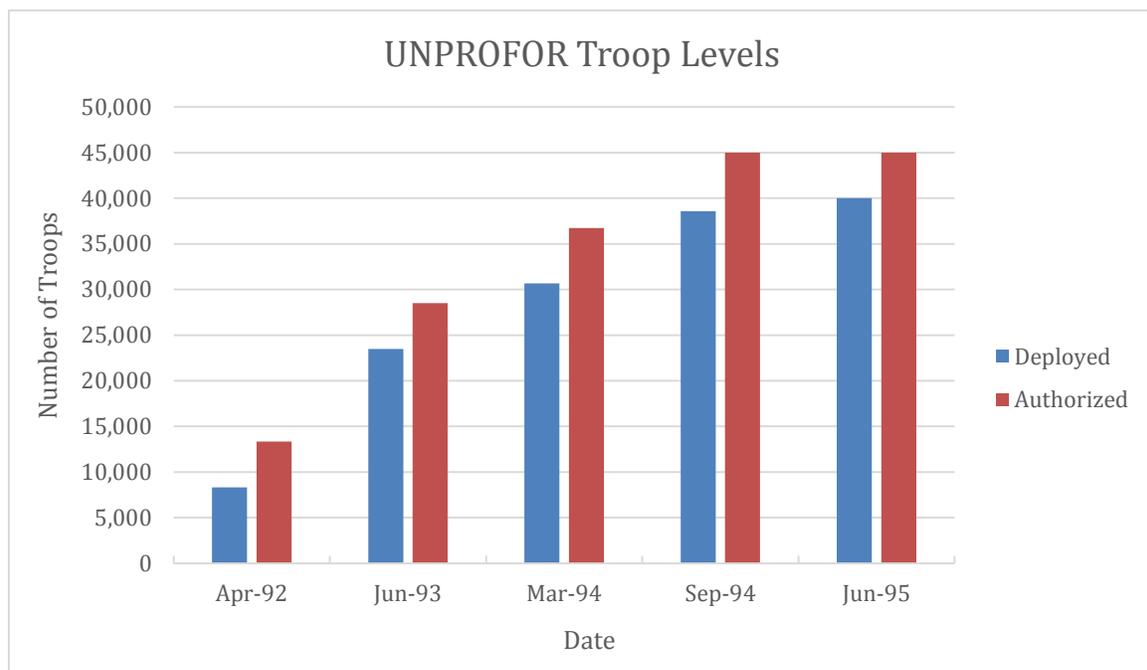
¹² Jenonne Walker email to organizers, October 11, 2015. Bosnian president Alija Izetbegović agreed to the Vance-Owen peace plan on March 25, 1993. The plan was endorsed by Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić at a meeting in Athens on May 3, but rejected by the Republika Srpska National Assembly on May 6.

¹³ UNSC Resolution 836, June 4, 1993, [S/RES/836](#).

¹⁴ Wahlgren to Annan, “[Security Council Deliberations on Safe Area](#)”, UNPROFOR Z-703, June 3, 1993.

¹⁵ For [15,000 figure](#), see UN Secretariat Working Paper, “Safe Areas,” May 28, 1993. For [34,000 figure](#), see UN Secretary-General report, June 14, 1993, S/25939.

[T1-50] In place of the “heavy option,” the Security Council endorsed a “light option” of 7,600 extra troops that would rely primarily on “the threat of air action” to deter attacks on the safe areas. In the event, the extra troops did not arrive in Bosnia until a year later.¹⁶ Most of these troops were assigned to Sarajevo and central Bosnia. Around 600 Dutch troops were deployed to Srebrenica, a figure that dwindled to around 300 by July 1995 because of the refusal of the Bosnian Serbs to permit rotations back from leave.



Source: UNSC resolutions, UNSG reports

Conference participants expressed differing opinions on the feasibility of the mandate provided to UNPROFOR under Resolution 836. UN Special Representative Yasushi Akashi described the resolution as “very unfortunate...I think many of us read it twenty, forty times, or even 100 times, without making sense of it. It includes so many phrases and qualifiers. You have to adopt resolutions that will not be laughed at by commanders and negotiators on the ground.” [T4-66] His views were echoed by Tharoor who said DPKO came under heavy pressure from western governments to provide a “light option”, even though they felt it was insufficient. He

¹⁶ See UN Secretary-General reports, March 11, 1994, [S/1994/291](#), and December 1, 1994, [S/1994/1389](#), particularly [paragraph 2](#).

agreed that the 34,000 figure was politically “unrealistic.” The purpose was “to let the Security Council know that this was the kind of number they needed to be talking about if they wanted to have Safe Areas that were defensible.” [T1-51]

According to Jenonne Walker, there was skepticism in the White House about the safe area concept, which was contained in a Joint Action Program endorsed by the United States, France, Britain, Spain, and Russia at the end of May 1993.¹⁷ (The program was the impetus for the adoption of Resolution 836.) She described the program as “fake policy. It gave no bones to anything...Most of us thought it was an embarrassment.” [T1-42] Hannay said he personally believed the Joint Action Program to be “an appalling idea, but you are paid to carry out the instructions of your government.” [T1-50]

Dissenting views came from Hasan Muratović, David Harland, and Joris Voorhoeve. “In my view, UNSC Resolution 836 was a good resolution,” said Muratović. “It provided the grounds for calling in air strikes, and for NATO to act. It was up to the decision-makers later to decide whether they wanted to strike or not.” [T1-53] Harland said there was “plenty of language” in Resolution 836 that would have “allowed for the application of force” had the necessary political will existed. [T1-56]

In sharp contrast to Akashi, Voorhoeve described Resolution 836 as “an example of clarity.” He noted that the resolution became “the legal basis for the use of air power and deterrence” against the Bosnian Serbs after the fall of Srebrenica. The minister acknowledged that there was “an enormous gap between the language of the resolution and the actual application,” but described deterrence as “an age-old principle of military power. You show beforehand that if the opposite side goes too far, there will be very serious consequences.” Had deterrence been used effectively prior to July 1995, said Voorhoeve, “it would have saved the lives of 8,000 people in Srebrenica.” [T1-57]

¹⁷ See Joint Action Program submitted to President of the Security Council by France, Russia, Spain, UK, and US, May 24, 1993, [S/25829](#).

4. The “Dual Key” decision, August 2-9, 1993

Resolution 836 called for “close coordination” between NATO, the UN Security Council, the UN Secretary-General, and UNPROFOR commanders on the ground about the use of air power, but did not spell out who would have ultimate authority.¹⁸ David Hannay said that none of the troop contributing nations objected to the principle that “the UN had to ask for them [air strikes]” to support UNPROFOR forces on the ground under Resolution 836. [T2-9] Jenonne Walker described a rearguard action by the United States at NATO to prevent the UN Secretary General [Boutros Boutros-Ghali] from exercising veto power over air strikes. She said that the dual key arrangement “snuck in” to an August 9 NATO statement over Washington’s objections.¹⁹ [T2-12]

The dual key arrangements, as finalized by NATO and the UN, were viewed as “unwieldy in the extreme” by military commentators.²⁰ The NATO military committee stipulated that air attacks would be “selective, carefully targeted, and precisely delivered” and preceded by clear warnings. The UN Secretary-General reserved the right to approve the first air strikes in consultation with the Security Council, UN mediator Thorvald Stoltenberg, and the governments of troop contributing nations. Approval from the North Atlantic Council (NATO’s governing body) was also required. Operational decisions would be made by the UNPROFOR force commander (a Frenchman) and the head of NATO Southern Command (an American). Either man could block the decision.

¹⁸ The “dual key” arrangement dated back to the implementation of a no-fly zone over Bosnia in Operation Deny Flight, which began on April 12, 1993, according to Rupert Smith. [T2-7]. “Deny Flight” was a NATO-run operation carried out in coordination with UNPROFOR. See also Brian G. Gawne, “[Dual Key Command and Control in Operation Deny Flight: Paralyzed by Design](#),” Naval War College, November 1996. “Approval for Deny Flight operations remained with the UN Secretary General,” although operational control was delegated to subordinate commanders on the ground.

¹⁹ See North Atlantic Council communique, August 9, 1993, particularly [paragraph 1](#).

²⁰ See, for example, report in the London Guardian, August 10, 1993.

These arrangements remained in place until July 26, 1995, after the fall of Srebrenica, when Boutros-Ghali agreed to relinquish his veto power over air strikes in favor of UN commanders on the ground.²¹

5. The Sarajevo and Goražde crises, February-April 1994

According to David Hannay, the defects of the dual key system did not become apparent immediately. [T2-9] The system worked relatively smoothly the first time air strikes were threatened following the Bosnian Serb shelling of a Sarajevo marketplace on February 5, 1994. Boutros-Ghali immediately agreed to a request from the US, UK, and French representatives on the UN Security Council to call on NATO to threaten air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs. NATO gave the Serbs 10 days to comply with an ultimatum to withdraw their heavy weapons from around Sarajevo.²² The North Atlantic Council also established a “heavy weapons exclusion zone” around the Bosnian capital. At the last moment, the Serbs began to pull back their weapons, avoiding the need for air strikes.

The dual key system worked much less smoothly two months later when Bosnian Serb forces began an offensive against the UN Safe Area of Goražde. The UN commander in Bosnia, General Michael Rose, called in close air support on April 10 to halt the Bosnian Serb advance. On this occasion, the Serbs responded by taking around 150 UN personnel hostage. According to a UN report authored by Shashi Tharoor, “the Bosnian Serb side quickly realized that it had the capacity to make UNPROFOR pay an unacceptably high price if air power was used on its behalf.”²³

The Goražde crisis established a pattern of escalation and counter-escalation in the form of NATO air strikes and Bosnian Serb hostage-taking that would be repeated the following year in Sarajevo. From Tharoor’s vantage point at DPKO, UN member states were unable to “make up their mind as to what they really wanted.” They

²¹ Barbara Crossette, “[UN Eases Way for Air Strikes](#),” New York Times, July 27, 1995.

²² See Boutros-Ghali letter to President of the Security Council, February 6, 1994, [S/1994/131](#) and North Atlantic Council communique, February 9, 1994, particularly [paragraph 6](#).

²³ Boutros-Ghali, “[Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to Security Council Resolutions 982 \(1995\) and 987 \(1995\)](#),” S/1995/444, May 30, 1995. See [paragraph 63](#).

attempted to create “the appearance of belligerence/muscular air power” through the application of “band aids” and “fig leaves.” [T2-16]

According to Joris Voorhoeve, “a choice should have been made in the spring of 1994. If we go for air power and deterrence, we should have been ready to pull out all blue helmets in order to prepare the way. But there were no preparations for that.” [T2-16] Carl Bildt dismissed Voorhoeve’s suggestion that blue-helmeted UN troops could have been easily re-hatted as green-helmeted NATO troops. He said “a major combat operation” would have been required to get supplies into Sarajevo and the eastern enclaves without Bosnian Serb consent. [T2-17]

The French ambassador to Bosnia, Henry Jacolin, agreed that the Sarajevo and Goražde crises marked a turning point. The NATO ultimatum that had been successfully applied in the case of Sarajevo “finally dissolved, like sugar in hot coffee, and was totally forgotten. What we achieved for a few days or weeks by starting the withdrawal of heavy weapons totally disappeared because the will of the international community was not maintained.” [T4-54]

6. NATO air strikes, May 25-26, 1995

The trial of strength between the UN, NATO, and the Bosnian Serb military leadership came to a head in May 1995 when the Serbs withdrew their heavy weapons from the collection points that had been established around Sarajevo a year earlier. This triggered an ultimatum from the UNPROFOR commander on the ground [Rupert Smith] and the [authorization of air strikes](#) by the SRSG [Yasushi Akashi] on May 25.²⁴ Instead of backing down, the Bosnian Serbs responded to the air strikes by shelling Srebrenica, Tuzla, and other “safe areas” and seizing more than 400 UN hostages. Some of the UN personnel were used as human shields, handcuffed to possible targets, to deter further attacks.

²⁴ See 1999 UN Srebrenica report, [paragraph 189](#) and [paragraph 190](#).

The rapid counter-escalation by the Bosnian Serbs confirmed the fatal flaw in the deterrence mechanism established by NATO and the UN. A leading advocate of air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs, US ambassador to Croatia Peter Galbraith, noted in a May 26 diary entry that he had “repeatedly urged Akashi to pull the UNMOs [United Nations Military Observers] in from places where they could be captured. I can’t believe this wasn’t done.”²⁵ Galbraith reiterated these criticisms in The Hague, saying that he could not understand the “logic of having troops in places where they are going to be taken hostage? It didn’t happen once, it happened a number of times: you do the air strikes, your troops are taken hostage, and you must then have a negotiation for the release of the hostages....I can’t understand, to be honest, how that made sense.”²⁶ [T2-17]

Replying to Galbraith, General Smith said that the goal of the air strikes was to re-establish the heavy weapons monitoring regime. Had he pulled the UNMOs out in advance, this policy would have been negated.

My solution was to ring up the capitals of the troop contributing nations and say, “I’m going to do this. There is a risk of hostages. Are you okay with that?” They said, “Yes, Yes, go ahead and bomb.” Two bombings later, they were not ok. [T2-18]

In a candid conversation with the US ambassador to Sarajevo on May 27, Smith said that the UN and NATO had reached a moment of truth. The “one thousand dollar question” was whether they were willing to cross “the pain barrier” by demonstrating a “willingness to escalate” and “a long-term commitment” to peace in Bosnia. “I’m part of the problem,” Smith told Menzies. “I’ve broken the machine and it can’t be put together again.”²⁷

²⁵ Peter Galbraith, [personal diary](#), National Defense University, May 26, 1995.

²⁶ The overall UN commander in the former Yugoslavia, General Bernard Janvier, had alerted the Security Council to the risk of hostage-taking on May 24. In a briefing for Security Council members, Janvier proposed withdrawing UNPROFOR battalions from the eastern enclaves, leaving only military observers behind. He also proposed withdrawing the heavy weapons collection points around Sarajevo, which “left UNPROFOR soldiers exposed and vulnerable across the total exclusion zone in BSA-held territory.” There was no support for these proposals on the Council. See 1999 UN Srebrenica report, [Paragraph 187](#).

²⁷ Menzies to SecState Washington DC, [“I’ve Broken the Machine.”](#) American Embassy Sarajevo, SARJ 00204, May 27, 1995.

7. The undeclared “bombing pause”, May 27-29, 1995

The bombing-hostage fiasco in Bosnia triggered a wave of soul-searching in western capitals, and a flurry of transatlantic telephone calls on May 27 between US President Bill Clinton, French President Jacques Chirac, and British prime minister John Major.²⁸ At an emergency meeting in the White House Situation Room on Sunday, May 28, Clinton’s top advisors agreed to an unpublicized bombing “pause” of indefinite duration. They also agreed to support French efforts to strengthen UNPROFOR by deploying a rapid reaction force, implementing more robust rules of engagement, and “regrouping” UN peacekeepers in order to reduce the risk of hostage-taking.²⁹ Chirac later told Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević that he had secured “President Clinton’s agreement that air strikes should not occur if unacceptable to Chirac.”³⁰

The decisions adopted in these secret meetings and telephone calls were transmitted downwards to UN peacekeepers via General Janvier, the overall UN commander in Bosnia. On May 29, Janvier issued Directive 2/95:

The execution of the mandate is secondary to the security of UN personnel. The intention is to avoid all loss of life in the defense of dispensable positions and to avoid all hostage-taking. Positions which can be reinforced or which can be recaptured through a counter-attack should not be abandoned. Positions which are isolated in Serb territory, the support of which cannot be guaranteed, can be abandoned when superior commands take such a decision, at the discretion of the superior command, when the positions are threatened and when the superior command considers that lives are at risk.³¹

While the May 27-28 consultations between Clinton, Chirac, and Major laid the basis for a more coherent and effective Bosnia policy over the long term, the bombing pause created a dangerous hiatus in the short term. Joris Voorhoeve pointed to a June 2 letter from Janvier to Smith emphasizing the need to “avoid any action which

²⁸ The [telephone calls are documented](#) in Chapter 1 of the 1997 State Department study “The Road to Dayton,” but the underlying memcons have not been released.

²⁹ See “[Summary of Conclusions of Principals Committee Meeting on Bosnia](#),” May 28, 1995.

³⁰ See Akashi to Annan, “[Discussions with President Milosevic](#),” UNPF-HQ Z-1020, June 19, 1995.

³¹ See 2001 French parliamentary commission report, [page 91](#). Smith relayed Janvier’s instructions to his subordinate commanders in a “[Post Airstrike Guidance](#)” memo, also dated May 29, 1995.

may degenerate into confrontation with the Serbs,” such as the use of air power.³² [T2-32] He said this amounted to a secret “decision to suspend the use of air power without saying when air power will be resumed.” [T2-33] Netherlands prime minister Wim Kok complained that the bombing pause was “not communicated” to his country. “But it remains really puzzling for me why this very important decision to have a pause, an unqualified pause—not forever, but at least for the time being—was undisclosed to the government of a country that had huge responsibilities in Bosnia, and particularly in Srebrenica.” [T2-38]

8. Srebrenica “game changer”, June 3-4, 1995

The largely hidden decisions taken by NATO leaders and UNPROFOR generals had an immediate impact on the situation in Srebrenica. On the night of May 28-29, following the seizure of UN hostages by the Bosnian Serbs, UNPROFOR ordered Dutchbat commander Thom Karremans to abandon his most vulnerable observation posts.³³ Colonel Karremans refused to comply with the order for operational reasons. He had earlier reported that Dutchbat would “lose its credibility” with the Srebrenica population in the event of such a pullback. There would be “no way back” once positions were abandoned.³⁴

On June 3, Bosnian Serb forces launched an attack on Observation Post Echo in the south of the enclave, forcing a Dutchbat withdrawal. Under existing NATO/UN policy that attack on UN peacekeepers should have triggered the use of close air support. A Dutchbat company commander, Kees Matthijssen, described the failure to respond to the attack on the observation post as a “game changer” that set the stage for the much broader assault on Srebrenica the following month. [T3-11]

³² Janvier to Smith, [“Letter from Janvier to Smith,”](#) UNPF-HQ, June 2, 1995.

³³ See Thom Karremans, *Srebrenica Who Cares?*, page 300.

³⁴ Karremans to BH Command, [“Mission of Dutchbat in SREBRENICA,”](#) May 10, 1995.



Dutchbat commander Thom Karremans with Netherlands Prime Minister Wim Kok

The following day, Sunday, June 4, Karremans informed his superiors that his troops were no longer able to fulfill their mission in Srebrenica as they were effectively “hostage” to the Bosnian Serbs. He called this communication his “Pentacost letter” intended to alert both the UN and Netherlands chains of command that “something is going wrong.”³⁵ [T2-49] He wrote that “tension has grown to a maximum” in the enclaves and food supplies would be exhausted “in some days” because of a Serb blockade. He was convinced that Bosnian Serb “offensive operations” against Srebrenica would continue. In Karremans’ words:

I wanted everybody in The Hague to know what was going on and support us...I was there for the population, but we had no support. I was willing to support the population in any way I could. But if you don’t have food, you don’t have the means, then it’s over. [2-49]

³⁵ Karremans to BH Command, “[Deteriorating Situation in SREBRENICA](#),” June 4, 1995. In a subsequent report on June 29, Karremans said that not “one single person” had been able to leave or enter the enclave from April 26 onwards, when the Serbs denied permission for the rotation of UNPROFOR personnel. Deliveries of diesel fuel and spare parts ceased in February, food in March, and medicines in mid-April. See Karremans to BH Command, “[Continual hostage of UN INFbn in Srebrenica](#),” June 29 1995.

9. On the edge of the “Mogadishu line,” June 9, 1995

On June 4, the same day that Karremans was writing his “Pentacost letter,” his commander, General Janvier, was holding a secret meeting with the Bosnian Serb military leader, General Mladić. What happened at that meeting has long been controversial. According to Hasan Muratović, Janvier promised Mladić a moratorium on air strikes in exchange for the release of the remaining UN hostages held in Bosnian Serb custody. “The bargain was: no hostages, no airstrikes in the future.”³⁶ [T2-28] There is, however, no primary source evidence for such a deal.

Contemporaneous notes of the conversation, taken separately by Janvier and Mladić, suggest that the Bosnian Serb commander did indeed demand a halt to the air strikes in return for the release of the hostages, but Janvier failed to respond.³⁷

Whether or not Janvier made an explicit promise to Mladić, it is clear that the UN military commander was extremely reluctant to authorize air strikes. In his May 24 remarks in New York, Janvier had called for a complete overhaul of the UN mandate in Bosnia, declaring that “we can no longer play draughts by the rules of chess.”³⁸ At a June 9 meeting in Split with Akashi and Smith, Janvier stated that “we are no longer able to use air power because of the obvious reason that are soldiers are on the ground. Whether we want it or not, the Serbs are controlling the situation. Thus it is impossible to take action with our forces that would endanger the political evolution. This stability must permit the relaunching of the political process.”³⁹ (This was an allusion to the resumption of peace negotiations by EU negotiator Carl Bildt, which would be jeopardized by a new confrontation with the Bosnian Serbs.)

³⁶ Muratović cited a conversation with European peace negotiator Thorvald Stoltenberg as the source of his information. [T2-28]

³⁷ See Janvier notes of the conversation, “[Meeting between General Janvier and General Mladic, June 4, 1995](#),” [English translation of document cited in 2001 French Parliamentary Commission report.] Mladić described the same meeting in a [June 4 diary entry](#), which quotes Mladić asking Janvier to “suspend all decisions on the use of force against the Serbian people.” It makes no mention of a promise by Janvier to suspend air strikes.

³⁸ See [extract from Janvier speech](#) to Troop Contributing Nations, New York, May 24, 1995.

³⁹ See notes of “SRSB’s Meeting in Split, 9 June 1995,” [page 2](#).

The June 9 discussion in Split revealed a gulf between the views of Akashi and Janvier, who were determined to preserve the appearance of neutrality, and Smith, who felt that UNPROFOR was already perceived as enemy by the Bosnian Serbs. Notes of the conversation show that Akashi and Janvier wanted to return to what they called the “Mogadishu line,” a reference to the “Black Hawk Down” incident of October 1993 when the hunt for a Somali warlord led to the deaths of 18 U.S. peacekeepers. To Smith’s insistence that “we are already over the Mogadishu line, the Serbs do not view us as peacekeepers,” Janvier responded, “I insist that we will never have the possibility of combat, of imposing our will on the Serbs. The only possible way is to go through political negotiations.”⁴⁰

10. Dutchbat appeals for close air support, July 6-11, 1995

UN and NATO strategists had been debating for months whether it made military sense for UN peacekeepers to remain in the vulnerable eastern enclaves, such as Srebrenica and Goražde. The “retrench and reinvigorate” option, trading “the eastern enclaves for more effective mission performance around Sarajevo,” had been privately mooted in a White House options paper as early as May 17.⁴¹ In his May 24 UN remarks, Janvier had described the UN military operation in the safe areas as being “of little use.”⁴² At a July 8 meeting in Geneva convened by the UN Secretary-General, Janvier insisted that the Serbs were “holding all the cards,” and that UNPROFOR deployment in the enclaves gave them “900 potential hostages” who could be seized at any moment.⁴³

Against this background, it was hardly surprising that Janvier’s subordinates felt there was little chance that the UN commander would approve an appeal for close air support in Srebrenica except in the most extraordinary circumstances. The first request for close air support from Dutchbat came on July 6 when the Serbs began their full-scale assault on Srebrenica, capturing a UN observation post (OP Foxtrot)

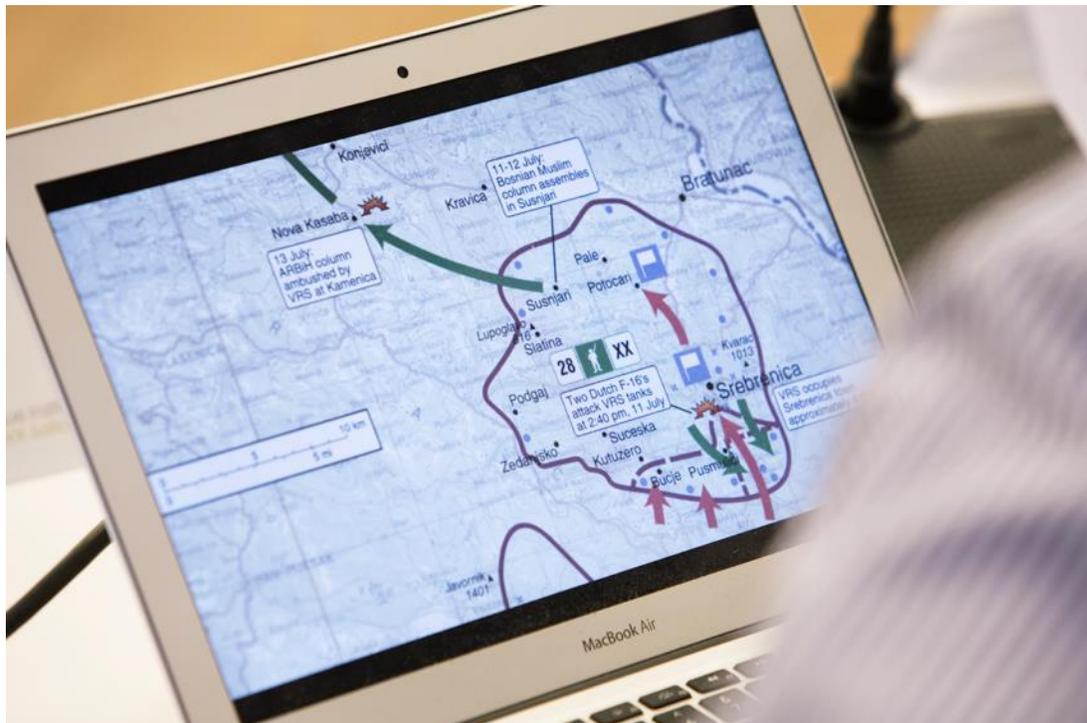
⁴⁰ See notes of “SRSG’s Meeting in Split”, op. cit., [page 5](#) and [page 6](#).

⁴¹ NSC discussion paper, “[Bosnia: Strategic Choices](#),” May 17, 1995.

⁴² See Janvier UN Speech, May 24, 1995, [paragraph 5](#).

⁴³ See 1999 UN Srebrenica report, [paragraph 260](#).

in the south of the enclave. The UNPROFOR chief of staff in Sarajevo, General Kees Nicolai, explained that he did not forward the request to Zagreb because it did not meet the “very restrictive” conditions laid down by Janvier. Janvier had stipulated that he would not use air power except as a last resort, after “Dutchbat first used their weapons.” [T3-29]



Displaying CIA map, Srebrenica July 1995

In order to meet Janvier’s conditions, Nicolai ordered Karremans “to create a situation in which Dutchbat, as well as the town of Srebrenica, would come under attack.” [T3-29] This was accomplished by establishing “blocking positions” along roads leading into the enclave, a novel concept for the peacekeepers. Karremans told us that he had studied various withdrawal options, but “we had not practiced blocking positions with white vehicles and blue helmets...I would say that this was an impossible mission.” [T3-32] Karremans reported that his blocking positions had come under attack at approximately 1830 on July 10 but his request for close air support was not approved by Zagreb until 1217 on July 11, nearly 18 hours later.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ See 1999 UN Srebrenica reports, [paragraph 284](#) and [paragraph 302](#).

By the time a Dutch F-16 dropped a bomb in the vicinity of a single Serb tank at 1440 on July 11, it was already too late.

Conference participants drew attention to several significant miscommunications between Srebrenica, Zagreb, and New York as the crisis drew to a head. Karremans was left with the erroneous impression that the air strikes, when they came, would be “massive,” a word he used at a meeting with the Srebrenica leadership on the evening of July 10.⁴⁵ According to defense minister Voorhoeve, UN military planners had talked about taking out “forty different Serb targets,” including multiple launch rocket systems. [T3-33] In the event, there was no attempt to destroy Serb artillery systems identified in advance by Karremans.

In the meantime, according to David Harland, the Security Council had received a “completely false” account of developments in Srebrenica in a briefing by a senior Boutros-Ghali aide, Ambassador Chinmaya Gharekhan. [T3-43] Gharekhan mistakenly told the Council on the evening of July 10 that there had “not yet been any requests for close air support” from the Dutchbat commander in Srebrenica.⁴⁶ He also stated incorrectly that the Serbs had “halted their advance” and Bosniaks had fired on an UNPROFOR APC.

11. The fall of Srebrenica, July 11-13, 1995

The fall of Srebrenica confronted the United Nations with a refugee crisis for which it was unprepared. In the June 9 meeting in Split, General Smith had predicted that “the Bosnian Serb army will continue to engage the international community to show that they cannot be controlled. This will lead to a further squeezing of Sarajevo, or an attack on the eastern enclaves creating a crisis that, short of air

⁴⁵ Karremans told the Bosniak leadership of Srebrenica on the evening of July 10 to expect “massive” air strikes the following day, allowing Dutchbat to recapture their “old positions.” See UNMO report, [110200B July 95](#). The mayor replied that he did not have “much confidence in the air strike.”

⁴⁶ For Gharekhan briefing to the UN Security Council on the evening of July 10, see Annan to Akashi, “Informal Consultations of the Security Council,” [MSC-2271](#), July 10, 1995, and USUN cable, July 10, 1995, [New York 00270](#).

attacks, we will have great difficulty responding to.”⁴⁷ Even though he expected an attack on Srebrenica, Smith did not believe the Serbs would attempt to take over the enclave completely. “The goal of the Serbs was not to fight the UN or NATO. They wanted to control us...This meant keeping the enclave intact, but squeezing it.” [T3-7] Captured Bosnian Serb documents show that this was indeed the original Serb intention. It was only on July 9, after encountering little resistance from Dutchbat or Bosnian government troops, or reaction from the broader international community, that Serbian commanders decided “to occupy the very town of Srebrenica.”⁴⁸



Mladić in Srebrenica, July 11, 1995

Fearing for their lives, some 15,000 men from Srebrenica attempted to escape across the mountains to government-controlled territory near Tuzla. Around 20,000 women and children, along with 2,000 men and boys, sought refuge at Dutchbat headquarters in Potočari, five kilometers north of Srebrenica. The acting

⁴⁷ See notes of “SRSG’s Meeting in Split,” op. cit., [paragraph 3](#).

⁴⁸ Zdravko Tolimir to Drina Corps Command, [Strictly Confidential No 12/46-501/95](#), July 9, 1995. A July 2 order by the Commander of the Drina Corps for the launching of the Krivaja-95 operation, 04/156-2, had spoken only of the need to “reduce” the Srebrenica and Žepa safe areas “[to their urban core](#).”

UNPROFOR commander ordered Dutchbat on the evening of July 11 to “take all reasonable measures to protect refugees and civilians in [their] care.”⁴⁹ The following day, Karremans reported that the refugees (and his own troops) were in a “sitting duck position”, vulnerable to shelling at any time from Serb mortar positions. He stated that he was therefore unable to “defend these people” or “to defend my own battalion.”⁵⁰



Mladić and Karremans in Bratunac, July 11, 1995

Karremans was summoned to meet with Mladić on the evening of July 11 in the nearby town of Bratunac. The Dutchbat commander said he was “not in the mood to start negotiations” as he had gone for six days with little sleep, drink, or food, and felt that the talks should to be conducted “on a much higher level.” [T4-4] Smith, who cut short his leave to return to Sarajevo on July 12, also believed that “CO Dutchbat” should not be left to deal with Mladić “on his own account” as he would

⁴⁹ Gobilliard to CO Dutchbat, “Orders for Defence of Dutchbat and Protection of Refugees in Srebrenica,” [111827B July 1995](#).

⁵⁰Karremans to Janvier, “[Meetings with Gen Mladic on 11 and 12 July 1995](#),” July 12, 1995.

be “talking from the jail.”⁵¹ Karremans said he agreed to attend the meeting after receiving “no answer” from headquarters because he needed Mladić’s cooperation in evacuating the refugees in and around the Dutchbat compound. At the end of the meeting, he reluctantly accepted a glass of spritzer (wine and water) from Mladić, an image captured in a Serb propaganda video and shown around the world.⁵²

Controversy has surrounded Dutchbat’s failure to prevent the Bosnian Serbs from separating the male refugees from the women and children on the pretext that men of military age had to be “screened” as possible “war criminals.”⁵³ (Nearly all the 1,500 or so men from Potočari were subsequently executed, along with men captured during the breakout attempt.) According to Nicolai, “we were taken by surprise the following day [July 12] by Mladić when the buses arrived around noon...It seems that Mladić had foreseen what would happen and arranged buses one or two days before. There was only one option left for us, which was to send peacekeepers in jeeps or on the buses to control the evacuations. This was not a success.” [T4-6] Dutchbat did not have enough available personnel to monitor the operation effectively.⁵⁴

Karremans said that Mladić “did not give us the chance to make proper arrangements.” [T4-7] He said events were moving “very, very fast” and it was necessary to “take decisions in split seconds. Sometimes, the decisions were not good, or not well thought out, but we felt that most of the decisions we took were correct.” [T4-4]

⁵¹ Smith memo, “[Aftermath of fall of Srebrenica](#),” July 13, 1995.

⁵² Dutch defense minister Voorhoeve described the photograph as a “false image,” noting that Karremans had initially refused the glass which was pushed into his hand. [T5-18]

⁵³ In September 2013, the Netherlands Supreme Court ruled that the Dutch State “[acted wrongfully](#)” toward three of the victims by “causing” them to leave the Dutchbat compound in Potočari on the evening of July 13, 1995 when it knew the risks to which they would be exposed. See judgment in the case of *The State of the Netherlands v. Hasan Nuhanović* ([English translation](#)).

⁵⁴ For bus escort problems, see 2002 NIOD report, [pages 2049-2050](#).

12. Gathering the evidence, July-August 1995



Reports of mass atrocities began to circulate within a few days of the fall of Srebrenica, drawing on a wide variety of sources, including the accounts of Dutchbat soldiers, refugees reaching government-held territory, survivors of mass executions, and even Serbian television. On July 17, the London Independent ran a story headlined “Bodies pile up in horror of Srebrenica,” based on a fleeting image of bodies piled up outside a warehouse captured on film by a Serbian cameraman.⁵⁵ DPKO cabled Akashi on July 18, complaining that “we have received nothing...from UNPROFOR” concerning the “widespread and consistent” reports of atrocities. Akashi responded the following day, estimating the total number of “unaccounted” at between 4,000-8,000, and noting that the Bosnian Serb army “refuse to grant ICRC access to detainees.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Robert Block, “[Bodies pile up in horror of Srebrenica](#),” The Independent, July 17, 1995.

⁵⁶ See Annan to Akashi, “[Human Rights Violations by Bosnian Serbs](#),” UN 2381, July 18, 1995; Akashi to Annan, “[Disposition of Displaced Persons from Srebrenica](#),” UNPF-HQ, Z-1198, July 19, 1995.

It would take many months to establish precisely what had happened to the captured Muslims, but the broad outlines were beginning to emerge by the end of July. The first credible report of mass executions was relayed to Washington by US ambassador to Croatia Peter Galbraith on July 25, based on evidence collected by UNPROFOR civil affairs officer Tone Bringa in Tuzla. Bringa told us that she went to Galbraith (whom she later married) because she was “completely despondent” about the likelihood of action being taken through the UN. “I was concerned that the report should reach someone who would realize the implication of it and then act. People didn’t act then.” [T4-31]

NSC official Sandy Vershbow annotated the Galbraith cable with the words, “The fact of Serb mass killings at Srebrenica is becoming increasingly clear. Grim Reading.”⁵⁷ This in turn led CIA analysts to search for overhead imagery of mass graves in the area north of Srebrenica, some of which was shown to the UN Security Council by Madeleine Albright on August 10. A journalist for the *Christian Science Monitor*, David Rohde, used newspaper reproductions of CIA imagery to conduct his own investigation on the ground in Bosnia.⁵⁸ Rohde told us that he under-estimated the number of dead, at 3,000 rather than 8,000. [T4-38]

While correct in its broad sweep, the early reporting was fragmentary, garbled, and erroneous in some of the details, such as the location of the mass execution sites. Albright misidentified a mass execution site in an August 10 briefing to the UN Security Council, based on incorrect information from Ambassador Galbraith and Assistant Secretary Shattuck. The UN bureaucracy was painfully slow in processing accounts of mass executions, as illustrated by the length of time it took for these reports to reach New York through official UN channels. The survivor of one such mass execution on July 14 (identified by his initials, O.H.) crossed over into Bosnian-government controlled territory on July 18. He told his story to Bosnian officials on July 20 and to UN officials in Tuzla (including Tone Bringa) on July 22. The official

⁵⁷ Vershbow to Tony Lake, “[Massacres at Srebrenica](#),” July 25, 1995.

⁵⁸ Rohde summarized his initial findings in articles for the *Christian Science Monitor*, “[Evidence Indicates Bosnia Massacre](#),” August 18, 1995, and “[How a Serb Massacre was Exposed](#),” August 25, 1995.

UN report was not submitted to Akashi until July 31. Akashi forwarded the report to New York on August 12, two days after the Albright briefing.⁵⁹

At first, there was little sharing of information between the Bosnian government, the UN, US intelligence agencies, journalists, and war crimes investigators. This led to delays in presenting a full picture. In the words of lead ICTY investigator Jean-René Ruez, “technological intelligence cannot be disconnected from the human reality, that is to say eyewitness testimony followed by verification on the ground.”⁶⁰ Successful war crimes investigations depend on information collated and triangulated from the widest possible variety of sources.

13. Endgame

Conference participants agreed that the Srebrenica tragedy gave a powerful impetus to the emergence of a new, more coherent international strategy for ending the Bosnia war. Discussions had been underway for several months, in western capitals and at the UN, on designing an “endgame” for the Bosnia conflict. According to US State Department official Jamie Rubin, the “turning point” occurred even before Srebrenica “when the capitals decided that the policy has to change at the highest level.” [T4-44] President Clinton was stung by criticism that he was being “outperformed” by the newly-elected president of France, Jacques Chirac, who noted sarcastically that “the position of the leader of the free world is now vacant.” Rubin’s boss, Madeleine Albright, presented a paper entitled “Elements of a New Strategy” at a White House meeting on June 21, in which she stated bluntly, “Bosnia is destroying our foreign policy domestically and internationally.” At a follow-up meeting three days later, national security advisor Anthony Lake agreed that “we cannot go on like

⁵⁹ See Akashi to Annan, “Srebrenica Human Rights Report,” [UNPF-Z-1406](#), August 12, 1995. For detailed chronology of this incident, see footnote 39 in Transcript 4-30. The place names in the original Galbraith cable of July 25 were confused and only clarified as a result of a subsequent investigation by the ICTY.

⁶⁰ See interview with Jean-René Ruez, “[Les enquêtes du TPIY](#).” *Cultures & Conflits*, 65 (Printemps 2007). For problems in interpreting the overhead imagery, and erroneous locations of mass grave sites, see footnotes 47 and 83 of transcript, session 4.

this...we need to get this thing off the table.”⁶¹ The Srebrenica debacle confirmed US officials in their view that a new approach was needed.



Signing the Dayton agreement, Paris, December 14, 1995

The Bosnian Serb moves against Srebrenica and other UN safe areas changed the overall strategic equation in the Balkans. According to Ambassador Galbraith, the Croats were worried that the Serbs would also eliminate the Bihać enclave in northwest Bosnia, threatening Croatia. On instructions from Washington, Galbraith transmitted “a sort of green light” to Zagreb for a major offensive known as Operation Storm that swept through Serbian positions in Krajina in four days (August 4-8) and continued into Bosnia. “This sequence of events was very much triggered by what happened in Srebrenica,” said Galbraith. “As we see from debates about Iraq and Afghanistan, it is boots on the ground that matter. For better or

⁶¹ See State Department study, “The Road to Dayton,” Chapter 1, [pages 11-12](#).

worse, the boots on the ground were Croatian, precisely because we did not want to have another Srebrenica.” [T4-41]

Western leaders signaled a change of course at the London conference of July 21, at which they delivered an ultimatum to the Bosnia Serbs to refrain from attacking Goražde. Rupert Smith described how he was summoned to a pre-conference meeting by British prime minister John Major and told, “The next time there is an attack on Goražde, on the British battalion, we are going to bomb. We are going to bomb and not stop bombing until the attack stops, and you Smith are going to have the key.” [T4-45] UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali (and his Special Representative, Akashi) surrendered the “UN key” immediately after the London conference, in what Clinton aides described as a “tremendous advance over previous NATO air strike decisions.”⁶² Smith “turned the UN key” on August 29 following the shelling of the Markale market place in Sarajevo.⁶³

By exposing the failures of western policy toward Bosnia, the Srebrenica genocide laid the basis for a much more muscular approach that combined force with diplomacy. Participants agreed that the new strategy relied on a number of elements for success, including a diplomatic initiative led by the United States with the support of key allies, a NATO-led bombing campaign, the deployment of a “rapid reaction force” in Bosnia, and “boots on the ground” in the form of Croatian and Bosnian government troops. In the words of Joris Voorhoeve:

The Serb leadership understood that the time had come to sit down at the negotiating table. This led to the Dayton peace agreement. My wish of course is that the policies that helped save Goražde, including the threat and use of real military power, had been applied several weeks earlier. That might have made a difference to the 8,000 people who were killed in Srebrenica. There is an unfortunate logic in politics: things sometimes get much worse before they get better, when everybody understands that muddling through will not work anymore and something radically different is necessary. [T5-27]

⁶² Anthony Lake, “[Memorandum for the President](#),” July 22, 1995. Boutros-Ghali formalized the new arrangements on July 26.

⁶³ See Smith, “The Utility of Force,” [page 365](#).

Controversies and disagreements

Given the wide range of countries, institutions, and individuals represented at the table, it was inevitable that there would be controversy over key episodes. The perspective from Srebrenica and Bosnia differed dramatically from the perspective from UN headquarters in New York and national capitals. These differences were underlined, perhaps most dramatically, by a lively debate over Bosnian Serb intentions and whether it was possible to predict the mass killings of some 8,000 Srebrenica Muslims.

For the most part, the international participants viewed Bosnian Serb decision-making as a “rolling” process, in which one decision led to another, depending on specific circumstances. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al-Hussein cited the conclusion of ICTY investigators that Mladić did not initially intend to capture Srebrenica, but wanted instead to reduce the enclave to its “urban core.” According to the ICTY, the decision to capture Srebrenica was taken on July 9, in response to the lack of effective opposition. It was followed by Mladić’s decision on the evening of July 11 to execute the male prisoners. Citing evidence presented to the ICTY, Zeid said that the Bosnian Serbs “continued the mass killing” after discovering that “they were not being exposed, because day by day the UN was not saying anything.” [T4-25]

Rupert Smith said the Bosnian Serbs believed themselves to be threatened by a sizable Muslim force based in Srebrenica (the 28th division). “Their tiny military minds get very upset with the idea that this force is threatening their defenses from the rear. They do not have enough people to deal with this threat and take care of the prisoners, as well as what is going on around Sarajevo and their offensive into Žepa. The simple solution is: kill the prisoners.” [T4-14]

Srebrenica survivor Muhamed Duraković disagreed sharply with this analysis. Based on his own experiences between 1992 and 1995, he said that the Bosnian Serbs had a long-term plan to clear eastern Bosnia of its majority Muslim population. On July 11, after Srebrenica fell, he thought he had reached “the last day

of my life.” Pointing to the fact that it took him 37 days to escape the dragnet established by Mladić, Duraković said that Bosnian Serb actions could not be explained as a matter of convenience. “If someone wanted to just kill a few thousand prisoners and get rid of them, they did not have to chase us around for months and kill everyone they found.” [T4-15]

Bosnian deputy prime minister Lagumdžija agreed with Duraković: “what happened in Srebrenica was a logical consequence of everything that happened before.” [T4-71] Tone Bringa cited a May 1994 study by a UN Commission of Experts into the “ethnic cleansing” of Muslims from the Prijedor district of northwest Bosnia after April 30, 1992.⁶⁴ The study expressed the opinion that “these events constitute genocide.” Bringa emphasized that “what was taking place in Srebrenica did not appear out of nowhere.” [T4-29]

A Serbian-American official, Obrad Kesic, (currently serving as the trade representative for Republika Srpska in Washington), made the point that there were also “Serbian victims” of the conflict. [T4-73] According to Kesic, the Bosnian Serb political leadership was “very concerned” by a Bosnian government military offensive, and the possibility that Bosniak forces would break out of Srebrenica in order to “tie down Serbian units.” [T3-13] Dutchbat commander Karremans said that the western part of the Srebrenica enclave (the so-called “Bandera triangle”) had been used as “a staging ground for the Bosnians to mount raids” against neighboring Serb villages to gather food. “We attempted to stop that, but we were not even allowed freedom of movement in our own territory.” [T2-48]

“Four or five Bosnia policies”

Differences of opinion over events in Bosnia were apparent not only *between* different institutions, but *within* the same institution. On July 1, 1995, less than a

⁶⁴ See “[Final report of the commission of experts established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780 \(1992\)](#),” S/1994/674.

week before Mladić launched the final attack on Srebrenica, US Bosnia envoy Robert Frasure complained in a cable to Washington that there were “four or five Bosnia policies all cohabiting amicably inside the administration with little or no sense of discipline.” He said the time had come to make a choice between the competing policies, “impose discipline and stay the course.”⁶⁵ The US ambassador to Croatia, Peter Galbraith, made no secret of his differences with many of his Washington-based colleagues. He said he used to refer to the European bureau of the State Department as the “Home Alone” bureau because it was so disconnected to events on the ground. [T1-45]

Similar divisions were apparent within the UN chain of command between New York and the field. The DPKO official responsible for Bosnia, Shashi Tharoor, argued that the mandate provided to UNPROFOR under UN resolutions, particularly 836, was “operationally impossible to define.” [T1-53] David Harland, a civil affairs officer in Sarajevo and author of the 1999 UN Srebrenica report, conceded that the political compromises involved in drafting UN resolutions were “ugly and muddled and morally wrong and absent in strategy.” Nevertheless, he insisted that there was “plenty of language” in the resolutions that “would have allowed for the application of force.” He said it was “frustrating” to receive guidance from New York after the adoption of UN resolutions “saying you should do even less than the resolution says.” [T1-56]

Several participants mentioned the confusion caused by the “avalanche” of UN Security Council resolutions on Bosnia, many of which were difficult or even impossible to implement, given the circumstances on the ground. International negotiator Carl Bildt said he “joked at times that they were issuing Security Council resolutions at a faster pace than we had time to read them. Some of them were utterly unrealistic which reduced respect for them as well.” [T4-61] According to a

⁶⁵ Robert Frasure to Secretary of State, “[Bosnia-Choosing which waterfall we will go over,](#)” July 1, 1995,

UN database, the Security Council adopted 78 resolutions on the former Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1995, of which 37 were directly related to Bosnia.⁶⁶

Neutrality versus taking sides

There were also disagreements over whether UN peacekeepers should allow themselves to take sides in the conflict, given the fact that the Bosnian Serb side was responsible for the overwhelming majority of atrocities. Tharoor and Akashi emphasized the need for strict neutrality, in accordance with classic UN peacekeeping doctrine. “We were there as a peacekeeping force,” Tharoor reminded us. “We needed to protect humanitarian aid deliveries to all sides. We needed to protect the UN personnel dispersing that aid. We also needed to ensure that aid deliveries were not used by one side in the conflict to make us a party to the conflict.” According to Tharoor, UN officials were fine with “the idea of the UN stepping aside and allowing Western governments, if they wanted, to take sides and end the war, but there was absolutely no indication of the necessary political will in the West to do that.” [T1-17]

Bosnian government officials insisted that the international community had a moral responsibility to distinguish between the “unprotected victim” and the “armed murderer.” In the words of Zlatko Lagumdžija, “Can you imagine a wolf and a lamb discussing what they will have for dinner? In that case, we should not be surprised if the wolf is at the table, not on the table.” [T4-71]

The uses and limitations of air power

Participants disagreed about the usefulness of air power as a tool for defending safe areas. Shashi Tharoor cited with approval the quip by American military strategist Eliot Cohen who compared air power to “modern courtship,” offering “gratification

⁶⁶ According to the UN Security Council Resolutions [database](#), the Security Council passed 3 Yugoslavia-related resolutions in 1991 (0 on Bosnia), 22 in 1992 (12 on Bosnia), 19 in 1993 (8 on Bosnia), 12 in 1994 (8 on Bosnia), and 22 in 1995 (9 on Bosnia).

without commitment.” According to Tharoor, “that is precisely what the Americans seemed to be wanting to do. They were going to be flying from a great height, drop bombs, and fly away, while the rest of us would wake up on the ground the next morning and live with the consequences.” [T1-53]

By contrast, Joris Voorhoeve believes that air power could have deterred Bosnian Serb attacks on the safe areas, but the threat was never systematically applied, prior to the July 1995 London conference. He said that there was an “enormous gap” between the language of UN resolutions and the way they were implemented. “After the fall of Srebrenica, everything became clear,” said Voorhoeve. “Air power was used in a very adequate fashion.” [T1-57] Jenonne Walker said the Clinton administration was unable to get European agreement on the credible threat of force. “We thought in August 1993 that we had an agreement on a serious NATO air threat. That fell apart with the dual key arrangement.” [T1-49]

Yasushi Akashi drew a distinction between close air support and air strikes. Close air support was intended for the defense of UNPROFOR personnel, whereas air strikes were viewed as a political act, with much broader targets and goals. Akashi said that “simplified procedures” were in place for the use of close air support, provided that forward air controllers “could identify the guns aimed at our personnel.” [T3-48]

In practice, as the Srebrenica case demonstrated, the conditions imposed by the UN for the provision of close air support were highly restrictive. According to Rupert Smith, “to have a case for calling in close air support, you had to have actual fighting going on at the time. Those were the rules of the game. If you have already abandoned a position, there were no grounds for close air support.” [T3-18] In other words, close air support could only be used in *flagrante delicto*. By the time it was actually applied, it was usually too late.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ See also 1999 UN Srebrenica report, [paragraph 243](#).

Lessons of Srebrenica

Returning from a visit to Bosnia in August 1992, (then-retired) U.S. diplomat Richard Holbrooke drew attention to the lack of a strategy for dealing with the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. “The humanitarian effort that has been the focus of the outside world’s concern deals with the consequences, not the causes, of this catastrophe,” observed the future Dayton peace negotiator in an article for the *Washington Post*. “Obscured in the debate over whether the U.S. should authorize force to deliver relief to existing victims is the fact that there is no debate and no plan to prevent more victims from being created.”⁶⁸

While conference participants disagreed on the causes of the Bosnia catastrophe, and the assignment of responsibility among the international players, there was broad agreement with Holbrooke’s basic thesis. The failure of western governments and the United Nations to formulate and implement an endgame strategy would extend the fighting for a further three years at the cost of tens of thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands of refugees. The quickest and most effective way of stopping the suffering was to end the war, but there was no coherent political-diplomatic plan in place to achieve that goal.

The politics of improvisation

Unable to agree on an overarching peace plan, such as the one proposed by international negotiators Cyrus Vance and David Owen, western leaders adopted a mix of short-term policies designed to create the impression of “doing something when, in fact, we were not willing to do anything serious.” [Jenonne Walker, T1-18] According to Walker, the Clinton administration had grave reservations about the “safe area” policy proposed by France in May 1993. “We thought it was folly to call something a Safe Area that we had no means or intent of keeping safe. But we had

⁶⁸ Richard Holbrooke, “The Cleansing Goes On”, *The Washington Post*, August 16, 1992. See Derek Chollet and Samantha Power, *The Unquiet American*, page 210.

zero political or moral credibility because we were not willing to participate ourselves. After years of blathering in NATO about sharing risks and responsibilities, we were not willing to participate.” [T1-19]

In the words of David Hannay, “The strategy was not to do lift-and-strike [the preferred American option of “lifting” the arms embargo against the Bosnian government combined with the threat of air “strikes” against the Bosnian Serbs], not to do the Vance-Owen peace process [the preferred European option], to set up a criminal tribunal, to impose sanctions on Serbia, and hope for the best.” [T1-5]

In the absence of strategic direction, UN actions were subject to the whims of Security Council politics. According to Tharoor, “the non-aligned wanted us to take the side of the Bosniaks. The British and the French did not because their own troops were on the ground. They wanted to give the impression of responding to all the moral outrage on television and coming out of Washington.” [T1-52] In the opinion of Carl Bildt, “The absence of a credible political strategy since the collapse of the Vance-Owen peace plan [in early 1993] made our policy somewhat incoherent, to put it mildly. Everything was a holding operation.” [T2-56]

Most participants agreed with the scathing judgment of Rupert Smith, expressed in his 2005 book, *The Utility of Force*, that the seeds of the Srebrenica disaster were “sown with the decisions made in the spring of 1993: decisions to threaten with no intention to act, to deploy forces with no intention to employ their force, decisions made in no political context except fear of the consequences of action to the force.”⁶⁹

Overselling the mission

The lack of clarity surrounding the UNPROFOR mandate in Bosnia was compounded by the natural tendency of politicians to oversell their achievements. Conference participants pointed to misleading titles, such as “protection force” and “safe areas”,

⁶⁹ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force*, [page 350](#).

that were used to describe a much more limited mission. The very name “UNPROFOR” was a “misnomer,” according to Security Council member Diego Arria. “With such a grandiose name, United Nations ‘Protection Force,’ we thought that something would be done. A few days later, of course, we discovered that this was not the case.” [T1-26]



Jenonne Walker, R, with David Hannay

Jenonne Walker lambasted “the folly of calling something ‘a protection force,’ or even a ‘peacekeeping force,’ when it has no intention of protecting anyone. It is a ‘violation observing force’ rather than a peacekeeping force.” [T1-18] In the view of Joris Voorhoeve, the UN peace operation was “mis-designed” from the start. “It was a blue helmet operation in the middle of a war. That was the original, conceptual mistake. By June [1995], everybody was in a trap.” [T2-51] “We promised something we couldn’t deliver. We couldn’t secure these [safe] areas,” concluded Carl Bildt. [T4-61]

Special Representative Akashi stressed the need for less rhetoric and more “realism”:

The perfect solution is an enemy of a good solution. In peacekeeping, you first have to do the humanitarian assistance side. You also have to negotiate a ceasefire to stop bloodshed, however fragile it might be. What we most want to accomplish may not be what is the most feasible or realistic. As Dag Hammarskjöld said, what the UN tries to do is not to take people to heaven, but to save them from hell. We have to be modest and realistic. [T4-65]

Policy mismatch

At the heart of the international failure in Bosnia prior to 1994 was a lack of clarity about the UN mandate and a mismatch between goals and resources. The contradictions inherent in the design and purpose of the mission were never resolved. The Security Council instructed UNPROFOR under Council Resolution 836 to “ensure full respect for the safe areas,” but failed to provide the resources necessary to carry out this lofty commitment.⁷⁰ At the most basic level, the Security Council passed resolutions under Chapter VII [peace enforcement] provisions of the UN Charter, to be carried out by a force configured for Chapter VI [peacekeeping] duties.

UNPROFOR chief of staff Vere Hayes said that the force was unable to adequately protect itself, let alone threatened Bosnians. The headquarters staff operated out of a “glass-roofed, glass-sided casino that had been painted white” within “range of the Serbs if they wanted to shell us.” [T2-21] Hayes said he found it “slightly strange” that “members of the Security Council thought that we were operating under a Chapter VII” mandate when it should have been “obvious” that UNPROFOR was a Chapter VI operation. [T1-28]

According to Rupert Smith, the UN Bosnia operation was hamstrung by a lack of coordination between the military commanders on the ground, the diplomats in New York, and the political leaders back home. Success in Bosnia required an “extremely close linkage between the political direction and the military commander...You have to arrive at a position where you apply the use of force to a

⁷⁰ See UNSC resolution 836, June 4, 1993, S/RES/836, [paragraph 4](#).

particular political end. If you cannot do that, in whatever way you wire it up, it will not work. It will fail. If your opponents are doing it better than you, they will defeat you. This is what you see taking place at every level of this venture until the very end when we managed to get it together in August 1995.” [T4-63]

The information bubble

Conference participants cited numerous examples of information bottlenecks, intelligence failures, and simple miscommunication, from the Security Council all the way down to the peacekeepers on the ground. Diego Arria echoed complaints that we had previously heard in the case of Rwanda about the lack of information available to non-permanent members of the UN Security Council. “I never belonged to a group less well informed than the Security Council of the United Nations,” he told us. “This is not a joke. It is not ironic, it is true. Only the major powers really know what is going on. The rest of us are on the periphery.”

According to Arria, Security Council members operated in a bubble symbolized by the room used for informal Council meetings. “As many of you know, the room has a very large window overlooking the East river in New York, but the drapes are always drawn. They don’t want to look outside.” [T4-55] The Venezuelan ambassador said he was writing a book about his time on the Council entitled, “A Room without a View.” [T4-55]

Several participants mentioned the UN aversion to intelligence-gathering, on the grounds that it might compromise the neutrality of UN missions. Colonel Karremans cited “a huge lack of useful intelligence” available to Dutchbat. He was obliged to rely on physical observation posts to serve as the “eyes and ears of the battalion.” [T3-25] According to Voorhoeve, the commander-in-chief of the Dutch army refused a secret American offer to equip Dutchbat peacekeepers with communications interception equipment that would have enabled them to listen into Bosnian Serb communications. [T3-26] A later Dutch inquiry quoted General Hans Couzy as

saying that acceptance of the so-called “magic suitcases” would be tantamount to “spying for the Americans”: this was “a peacekeeping mission and not a war.”⁷¹

David Hannay said that “it was shocking to hear during this conference of the complete absence of intelligence available to the UN forces in the safe areas. That is terrible. National intelligence capabilities have got to be tailored in a way that they can be made available to people putting their lives at risk in the pursuit of peacekeeping.” [T4-49]

The lack of adequate intelligence transcended the UN chain of command. Like other western governments, the Netherlands downgraded its intelligence-gathering capabilities following the end of the Cold War, according to Voorhoeve, abolishing its foreign intelligence service in 1991. “We thought it was not so necessary any more, once the Cold War had ended. If something happened in the world, our allies would inform us. But that is not the way it works. In the intelligence field, if you don’t know anything, you don’t hear anything.”⁷² Voorhoeve said that Dutch leaders had come to understand that “even a small power with an active foreign policy” needs a “very sizable” foreign intelligence service. [T2-42]

Distorted human rights reporting

Human rights reporting during the Bosnia war often took a back seat to political priorities, according to both US and UN officials. Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights John Shattuck told us that his bureau was “constantly sidetracked” in attempting to bring human rights violations to the attention of the public. “We would be brought in from time to time and then pushed back when it was felt that what my bureau was spotlighting was not going to be helpful to the political

⁷¹ See NIOD report, [page 2847](#). UN peacekeepers in Rwanda, including General Romeo Dallaire, also noted the ban on the gathering of “intelligence,” which would have been perceived as a violation of their neutral status. See Rwanda rapporteur report, [page 16](#).

⁷² The intelligence cutbacks were not limited to small countries like the Netherlands. The United States closed many of its CIA stations in Africa for budgetary reasons following the end of the Cold War. See Rwanda rapporteur report, [page 17](#).

negotiations.” [T1-47] He said he was “basically put under wraps” after a visit to Vukovar in January 1994 to investigate war crimes allegations that was deemed “too high profile” in Washington. He was not allowed to travel back to the region until after the Srebrenica massacre in July 1995. Bosnia negotiator Richard Holbrooke encouraged Shattuck to speak to the media, but “only in close coordination” with his team, so that his activities “can be separated from, but reinforce, our negotiations.”⁷³

In the case of the UN, human rights reporting was hampered by the perceived need for “neutrality” and “balance.” David Harland noted “an entire culture” within the UN civil service that insisted that all information be “rendered neutrally.” He cited the example of a report on violations of the Sarajevo weapons exclusion zone soon after his arrival in theater in 1993. The initial draft of the report noted 920 heavy weapons violations by the Bosnian Serbs and 80 by the Bosnian government. When it was reported up the chain, this became “1000 violations by both sides.” “What had been a very simple factual story reporting a grotesque action by one side and a limited response by the other was rendered into something totally bland,” recalled Harland. [T4-50]

A similar point was made by Jamie Rubin, a senior aide to US ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright. He said that UN reporting in the wake of Srebrenica indicated “a desire to cast blame on both sides, [avoiding the issues] of the risk of slaughter of the Bosnian men and whether Serb soldiers were abusing the civilians. He cited passages in UN reports “that make it seem like the Bosnians are the problem.”⁷⁴ [T3-45]

UN Human Rights High Commissioner Zeid agreed that it is necessary to avoid moral equivalence in human rights reporting. “Just because there is a complex political situation does not mean that the moral situation is similarly complex. There

⁷³ Holbrooke to Galbraith, [private note](#), August 1, 1995.

⁷⁴ As an example, Rubin cited an Akashi cable to Annan, “[Situation in Srebrenica](#),” UNPF-HQ, Z-1154, July 13, 1995. He said that [paragraph 7](#), [paragraph 8](#), and [paragraph 9](#), was “the kind of stuff that made us doubt what was coming out from the political side of the United Nations.”

is a very complex political situation in Myanmar, but the moral situation is very clear. We should not confuse the two.” [T4-69]

Institutions or individuals?

Conference participants differed in their concluding remarks over whether to put the emphasis on the proper functioning of institutions or the performance of individuals. The dichotomy was most clearly articulated by an exchange between Shashi Tharoor and David Harland. From Tharoor’s vantage point in New York, there was a “very clear” formula for successful peacekeeping, which was violated in the former Yugoslavia:

It is a triptych. First you need a coherent, clear, implementable mandate. Second, you need resources that are commensurate with that mandate. I mean military as well as financial resources. Third, you must have political will. This is fundamental because it underpins the other two. Without political will, you won’t get the resources and you won’t get a clear mandate. If you have all of those, you have a successful peacekeeping operation. Peacekeeping should not be a substitute for the absence of political will which is what we saw in Bosnia. [T4-58]

Tharoor noted that “peacekeeping in the classic sense requires the cooperation of the parties...When cooperation is doubtful, you should not have a peacekeeping cooperation.” In the case of Bosnia, the UN allowed a peacekeeping operation to morph into a peace enforcement operation as the result of a change of mandates by the Security Council.

A very different perspective was provided by David Harland who described himself as inhabiting “the bottom end of the UN food chain” as a civil affairs officer in Sarajevo. Harland said it was unrealistic to expect “a very clear mandate or a clear decision to wage peace or war.” He said that the actions of individuals mattered, pointing to the way in which Rupert Smith began preparing for the use of force against the Bosnian Serbs in the wake of Srebrenica. Harland believes that the Serbs would have stopped” their attack on Srebrenica had UNPROFOR approved close air support for Dutchbat in a timely manner.

The absolutely striking level of failure that I would go to is the UNPROFOR level...People who are now dead would be alive if UNPROFOR had done those things that it was mandated to do but did not have the political will to do. I feel that the principal weakness in UNPROFOR was in Zagreb with Mr. Akashi but also with General Janvier. [T4-50]

The view from the UN today



[Zeid Al-Husseini, R, with Yasushi Akashi](#)

As the only currently-serving UN official at the table, High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Al-Husseini was able to bring a modern-day perspective to the conversation, drawing on his “almost continuous presence at the UN” since his time in the former Yugoslavia. [T4-69] Zeid agreed with Tharoor that “mandates are important and resources and political will are necessary,” but insisted, along with Harland, that “what also matters is performance...You have what you have, but how well do you perform with what you have?” He cited an internal UN report in 2014

that revealed “a massive failure in the protection of civilians by the UN, notwithstanding everything written in the resolutions of the Security Council.”⁷⁵

Zeid criticized the UN for being “too quick to try to please,” and wanting to be “on good terms with everybody,” rather than imposing its authority. “In many cases, not just Bosnia but today as well, we are often terrified of our interlocutors and what they may do. We should also be prepared to allow the possibility that they may be terrified of us too. We do not factor that into our thinking. No lesson appears to have been learned in this regard, which is so depressing.”

The High Commissioner elaborated on these points in a briefing for the UN Security Council on July 8 that cited the discussions in The Hague. He said that the UN frequently fell into the trap of moral equivalence. “The fact that all sides committed crimes was true, but this did not mean that all sides were equally guilty—not when scale and proportion were factored in.” He also condemned the “hesitation of the United Nations to use NATO air power” which “meant the Bosnian Serb leadership could push on an open door...The United Nations simply became reactive, especially after the collapse of the Vance-Owen plan in 1993.

UNPROFOR feared the Bosnian Serbs. We in UNPROFOR did not even allow for the possibility they could also have feared or learned to fear us. We were often timid, and readily communicated this impression. The most foundational lesson of Srebrenica was this: To succeed, the United Nations must be respected. For the United Nations to be effective in robust peacekeeping, all parties to a conflict, and in particular the aggressor, must take the measure of the Council, its decisions and the United Nations presence on the ground. They must believe there will be serious consequences, and no impunity.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ OIOS report, “Evaluation of the implementation and results of protection of civilians mandates in United Nations peacekeeping operations,” [A/68/787](#), March 7, 2014.f

⁷⁶ See [UN Security Council minutes](#), July 8, 2015, S/PV.7481.

Conference Participants

(Unless otherwise indicated, positions given relate to period 1993-1995)

- Yasushi Akashi, UN Secretary-General Special Representative in former Yugoslavia, 1993-1997
- Diego Arria, Venezuelan representative on UN Security Council, 1991-1993
- Carl Bildt, European Union Special Envoy to former Yugoslavia, 1995
- Thomas Blanton, National Security Archive (moderator)
- Tone Brंगा, UN Civil Affairs official, 1994-1995
- Michael Dobbs, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (expert)
- Muhamed Duraković, Srebrenica survivor, currently senior advisor International Commission for Missing Persons
- André Erdős, Hungarian representative on UN Security Council, 1990-1993
- Peter Galbraith, US ambassador to Croatia, 1993-1998
- David Hannay, UK Permanent Representative on UN Security Council, 1990-1995
- David Harland, Head of UN Civil Affairs, Sarajevo, 1993-1995
- General Vere Hayes, Chief of Staff to UNPROFOR, 1993
- Larry Hollingworth, UNHCR, Sarajevo-Srebrenica
- Cameron Hudson, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (host)
- Henry Jacolin, French ambassador to Bosnia, 1993-1995
- Colonel Thom Karremans, Dutchbat III commander, 1995
- Obrad Kesic, Director Republika Srpska Office for Cooperation, Trade and Investment, Washington DC
- Wim Kok, Netherlands Prime Minister, 1994-2002
- Zlatko Lagumdžija, deputy prime minister, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1993-96
- General Kees Matthijssen, company commander, Dutchbat III, Srebrenica, 1995, currently commander Netherlands Air Mobile Brigade
- Hasan Muratović, minister for relations with UNPROFOR, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1992-95
- General Kees Nicolai, chief of staff to General Smith
- Zeid Ra'ad Al-Hussein, political officer, UNPF 1994-96; currently UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
- David Rohde, journalist and author *Endgame: The Betrayal and Fall of Srebrenica*
- James Rubin, advisor to US Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright
- John Shattuck, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy and Human Rights
- General Rupert Smith, UNPROFOR commander in Bosnia, 1995, Assistant Chief of Defense Operations, 1992-1994
- Shashi Tharoor, senior advisor to Kofi Annan, UN Under Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations
- Joris Voorhoeve, Netherlands defense minister, 1994-1998
- Jenonne Walker, Europe director, National Security Council, 1993-1995
- Abiodun Williams, The Hague Institute for Global Justice (host)

Conference Agenda

Monday, June 29, 2015: The Safe Area policy, 1993-1995

Morning (9:30 am – 12:30 pm)

Session 1: Creating the “Safe Areas”

- General Morillon’s visit to Srebrenica, March 1993.
- Inside the United Nations Security Council.
- Decision-making in Western capitals.
- The role of the media and public opinion.
- Negotiating the Srebrenica “Safe Area” agreement.
- UNSC visit to Srebrenica, April 1993.
- The “Joint Action Programme.” Limitations on the UN mandate. Reservations of UNPROFOR commanders.

Afternoon (2:00 pm – 5:00 pm)

Session 2: Testing the “Safe Areas”

- Negotiations on “Close Air Support.” The “dual key” system.
- Resources available to UNPROFOR.
- The Dutch decision to send peacekeepers to Srebrenica.
- Goražde and Bihać crises, April–December 1994. A dry-run for Srebrenica?
- Debates about the use of air power.
- NATO bombing of Serb positions, May 1995.
- Bosnian Serb response. Hostage-taking. Shelling the Safe Areas.

Tuesday, June 30, 2015: The Fall of Srebrenica, July 1995

Morning (9:30 am – 12:30 pm)

Session 3: The Fall of Srebrenica

- The final Serb offensive on Srebrenica, July 1995.
- Appeals for Close Air Support.
- Inside the UN/Dutchbat chain of command.
- Bosnian Serb decision-making.
- Negotiating with Mladić and Milošević.

Afternoon (2:00 pm – 5:00 pm)

Session 4: Endgame-Lessons from Srebrenica

- What did we know and when did we know it?
- The Road to Dayton

Wednesday, July 1, 2015: Public Session