



Australian Government

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Srebrenica Massace

I rise to support the motion put forward by the member for Melbourne Ports which utilises the words of the decision of the International Court of Justice. The Moreton electorate is home to many Bosnians who survived the horrors of the war in former Yugoslavia.

As former refugees they have resettled to make a new life for their families in Brisbane's southern suburbs, a long way from the violence that shattered their lives in the early 1990s.

Up to 8,000 Bosnian Muslims, mostly men and boys, were slaughtered in the Srebrenica massacre over five days of horror in July 1995. Thousands of women and girls were removed from their homes, raped and assaulted by Serbian soldiers, with lingering life-shattering consequences. Sixteen years after the war the victims are still slowly and methodically being identified through painstaking DNA analysis.

The genocide was carried out by Serbian forces under the command of General Ratko Mladic. The International Court of Justice-and I commend the fine efforts of the judges from that court, especially Air Commodore Retired Kevin Parker QC, whom I recently heard talk in Melbourne about his service-found Serbia to be in breach of the genocide convention. Although not held directly responsible, they were found to have failed to help bring the accused to justice. General Ratko Mladic was eventually arrested in May this year and extradited to the Hague. It is disgusting that, after the horrors witnessed during World War II, genocide can still be the vile and evil product of modern warfare. What the world agreed should never happen again has happened too many times over, as we have heard tonight. The Srebrenica massacre and widespread genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina share their place in history among the criminal acts of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, of Saddam Hussein in Kurdistan and of the Hutu extremists in Rwanda.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina more than 200,000 Bosnian Muslims were systematically murdered. The then US Assistant Secretary of State, Richard Holbrooke, called these acts 'the greatest failure of the West since the 1930s'. In response, NATO forces began bombing Bosnia-Herzegovina on 30 August 1995-and that is not that long ago.

This campaign led to the Dayton peace agreement, but for the victims of the genocide it was all too late.

Between 1992 and 1995 Australia welcomed more than 23,000 refugees from the former Yugoslavia. As I have said, many of them settled on Brisbane's south side, especially in my home suburb of Moorooka. They care for my children and are good citizens; they are my taxi drivers; they are my people. Last month I hosted a barbecue with some of the Bosnians in my electorate. More than 200 people turned out to meet me, their local MP, and the Ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dr Damir Arnaut, and to talk about the future and local issues concerning them. I think it says something about the spirit of the Bosnian people that they have been able to leave the atrocities of war behind them and start a new life in Australia, but they are adamant that Srebrenica should not be forgotten. Despite all our best intentions of obtaining a better world, humanity does have a horrible history. We must ensure that the mistakes of the past are never repeated in our future.

In 2009 the European Parliament acknowledged the Srebrenica genocide and also declared 11 July as a commemoration day. As I said earlier, most of the words in the motion put before us today by the member for Melbourne Ports are those of the International Court of Justice about that genocide, the biggest war crime in Europe since World War II. So it is appropriate that this House, a house of democracy, should also recognise 11 July as Srebrenica Remembrance Day, using the very words of the International Court of Justice. They are not words plucked out of the air but words put forward by judges doing a difficult job under difficult circumstances.

It has been 16 years since the atrocities but, even though it might involve digging up the bodies that have been moved two times and bones that have been jumbled up, people are going back and extracting the DNA evidence and, slowly but methodically, tracking down the people who perpetrated these crimes. That is what humanity must do.

I thank the member for Melbourne Ports for bringing this matter to the attention of the parliament and I thank all the speakers who have made contributions. I commend the motion to the House.