

30 Years Later: Sarajevo
Introductory Remarks
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Sarajevo
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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Friends,

Today we are gathering to remember the thousands of wounded and killed civilians of Sarajevo. We remember the hundreds of children killed and we grieve with their families thirty years on.

The Siege of Sarajevo was one of the darkest moments in recent history. That such flagrant violations of the laws of war causing immense human suffering could take place just a mere few decades after the horrors of World War II, was unimaginable and shocked the conscience of the world.

I remember seeing images of the death and destruction from the Siege. At the time, I was a young prosecutor in my hometown in Belgium. They reminded me of the stories my father and grandfather used to tell me about the Second World War, which I always understood to be a thing of the past. But it was happening again in Sarajevo. And it is happening today in Ukraine.

Sarajevo, with its historical, religious and cultural diversity, stood as a symbol of multiethnic co-existence. The city was the antithesis of the rising belligerent politics of ethnic exclusiveness. Places like the National Library were destroyed as a means of tearing apart the city's social fabric and cultural heritage. Indeed, it was the soul of Sarajevo that came under attack.

For three and a half years, citizens of Sarajevo were encircled, trapped and bombarded on a daily basis. The "Olympic Mountains of Sarajevo" from just a few years before became the launchpad of a relentless shelling and sniping campaign that was aimed at spreading terror among the civilian population. It did just that. Extreme fear and psychological harm were inflicted on the people of Sarajevo. Children, men and women of all ages, were killed and wounded in their thousands.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Siege of Sarajevo was the first case brought before the ICTY that focused on breaches of laws regulating the conduct of war. The investigation was unprecedented in its complexity. Determining the origin of fire of the shells that were indiscriminately launched at the city presented a challenge for my Office. The investigation was highly technical in nature, and required the involvement of a vast team of analysts and experts to reconstruct crime scenes using innovative visual technologies.

The painstaking work of dozens of investigators, prosecutors and analysts led to a number of charges, including unlawful attacks on the civilian population and the crime of terror. Only the crime of spreading terror, never before adjudicated by an international tribunal, could adequately capture the scope of the horrors committed against the people of Sarajevo.

It was apparent from our investigation that the intention of the Bosnian Serb forces was to instill in each citizen the realisation that, so long as he or she remained in Sarajevo, they and their loved ones lived under an inescapable risk of death. Our prosecutions demonstrated that the suffering of civilians was not an incidental by-product of the armed conflict in Sarajevo, but rather its intended purpose.

The cases could not encompass all the individual sniping and shelling incidents that took place, but through the testimony of survivors and other eyewitnesses, the pattern and scale of the shelling and sniping campaign emerged in the courtroom.

Through the testimonies of survivors the world learned about the scenes of carnage, destruction, panic, and terror at Markale; the devastation caused by air bombs that were strapped to the back of trucks and launched from the ground, and the sniping and shelling of rescue workers trying to bring victims to safety.

The horrifying truth of what this city and its inhabitants survived has been well documented in tens of thousands of pages of court records, which are accessible to anyone, including through the ICTY Information Centre.

Yet today, thirty years later, there are those who deny, relativize and minimize these established facts. Politicians are establishing pseudo-scientific commissions to rewrite the history of the Siege for political gain. The people of Sarajevo are being told that they inflicted this on themselves.

Glorification of convicted war criminals is more rampant today than ever before.

This is unacceptable.

My Office has successfully prosecuted those most responsible for planning and ordering the shelling and sniping campaign unleashed by the Bosnian Serb leadership on the population of Sarajevo. Military commanders of the Bosnian Serb forces that surrounded the city – Stanislav Galić and Dragomir Milošević – as well as their superiors Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić.

Today, there are increasingly louder voices saying that we should move on and focus on the future. When such visitors come to my office I always show them the book that sits on my desk; a book I received from the Association of Parents of Murdered Children in Besieged Sarajevo. The book which is entitled “Crimes against the Children of Besieged Sarajevo” presents the stories of the short lives of hundreds of children of Sarajevo, their dreams and wishes. For their parents, these are not historic events. Their tragic loss is the center of their reality yesterday, today and tomorrow. They deserve justice.

Accountability efforts at the national level therefore remain a priority. The subordinates of Karadžić, Mladić, Galić and Milošević and others complicit in these horrific crimes must be held to account. And although such prosecutions will not bring back those who lost their lives, they offer a measure of justice for the victims. I pledge that my Office will do everything we can to assist national prosecution offices in achieving greater justice.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let this commemoration serve as a reminder that the fight for justice and the truth is as alive today, as it was thirty years ago.

It must not abate or rest. We are all called upon to demonstrate the extent of our commitment to justice, and ultimately peace and reconciliation.

Dear Friends,

Let us not forget that this day marks thirty years since the start of the Siege, and also marks the anniversary of the liberation of Sarajevo during World War II.

It is a solemn moment to pause and reflect on the enormous suffering of humanity manufactured by man and the politics of hate.

Today, in honor of the Sarajevo victims, let us demonstrate unconditional commitment to human dignity and life. Let us ensure that the pain inflicted on this city and its people never repeats.

Thank you for allowing me to join you today.