

Mladic Genocide Verdict: A Warning to All Atrocity Perpetrators

Today, Wednesday, 22 November, Ratko Mladić was found guilty of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity in the final verdict of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Mladić, the former Commander of the Bosnian Serb Army, was found guilty of genocide at Srebrenica in 1995, as well as war crimes committed against non-Serb civilians elsewhere in Bosnia. He was also deemed responsible for terrorizing and shelling the residents of Sarajevo during its notorious siege and of taking UN peacekeepers hostage.

Since its establishment in 1993, the ICTY has concluded proceedings against 154 persons for serious violations of international humanitarian law committed in the former Yugoslavia between 1991 and 2001. The path to justice for the victims of the war has been long and torturous. Despite accusations that the Tribunal has been costly and inefficient, today's verdict is a victory for everyone who, despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles, sought accountability for atrocities committed in the former Yugoslavia.

Mladić is perhaps the most notorious war criminal to be tried by the Tribunal. Two decades ago he operated with total impunity, brazenly defying international law and ordering his men to systematically murder more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica. At the time Mladić was considered all-powerful in the territory his forces controlled. When the war finally ended, Mladić became a fugitive from justice and was on the run for more than 15 years, before finally being arrested in 2011. Today's verdict means that Mladić will die in prison, and will forever be remembered as a convicted genocidaire and war criminal.

Today's verdict is important for all of Mladić's victims. Even though there are many communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina who still find themselves divided over the legacy of the war, hopefully people will now work afresh to support reconciliation.

Today's judgment should also send a strong message to other atrocity perpetrators in the world today. Those who use poison gas against civilians in Syria, who bomb schools and hospitals in Yemen, and who have conducted a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya in Myanmar, should all sleep a little less easy tonight. Today's verdict is a powerful reminder that international justice can catch up with all perpetrators of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, regardless of how powerful they currently seem. One day these perpetrators may also face their day in court, where they will have to confront their victims and face the verdict of history. Let us hasten the day.