

Srebrenica, thirty years later: lessons humanitarian workers must not forget

By **Eric Stobbaerts**

Thirty years ago, on July 11, 1995, the Srebrenica massacre began, one of the most atrocious episodes of the Bosnian war and the worst massacre on European soil since World War II. Over the course of just a few days, more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were systematically executed by Bosnian Serb forces under the command of General Ratko Mladić and his militias. Srebrenica had been declared a “safe zone” on April 16, 1993 (Resolution 819) by the Security Council. The United Nations did not prevent the Bosnian Serb advance nor protect the civilian population. The UN peacekeeping forces, outnumbered, poorly equipped, and without a strategy, offered no meaningful resistance.

The massacre was classified as genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and confirmed by the International Court of Justice, marking a legal and moral milestone in international law. This genocide was observed, underestimated, and ultimately tolerated by the international community. This crime marked a collective failure to protect civilian populations and questioned the effectiveness of the multilateral system in preventing mass atrocities, leaving deep scars in Bosnia and a bitter and shameful lesson for the international community on the consequences of inaction.

Srebrenica remains one of the most painful failures of international diplomacy, of humanitarian presence, and of my own experience. To this day, questions remain about what it means to bear witness, to speak out, and to act—or not act—in the face of mass atrocity.

We were there. And it meant nothing.

As humanitarian actors, we had been in Srebrenica since 1993, supporting clinics, tending to the wounded, and trying to supply an enclave ravaged by hunger. But when the killings began, we were only able to protect part of the staff. We were witnesses, not shields. People providing aid, not deterrents.

The protection supposedly offered by the “safe zone” was a false promise, backed by peacekeeping forces with insufficient resources, political indecision, and a powerless humanitarian presence in the face of the killing machine.

The international community (NATO, the UN, and Western powers) only intervened decisively after the massacre, reflecting their geopolitical priorities and the fact that they regarded Bosnia more as a territory to be managed than a sovereign entity.

Lessons we should already have learned

Humanitarian workers learned, or should have learned, harsh truths: ignoring local voices and viewing conflicts through a distorted North-Western lens undermines both understanding and responsiveness. Focusing on control and stability often comes at the expense of justice and reconciliation. In this case, mere presence did not protect the population but served only to witness the violence. Silence in the name of neutrality posed a risk of complicity, blurring the line between action and moral inaction. Humanitarianism must never be an excuse for international inaction nor a substitute for political courage and military protection.

Beyond this, one crucial lesson is often overlooked: in crises like Srebrenica—and the current one in Gaza—humanitarian efforts must go beyond emergency relief and support non-humanitarian solutions to genocide and crimes against humanity. What could have saved lives in Srebrenica was not another medical convoy with surgical supplies but the courage to open safe corridors for families to escape to central Bosnia and reunite. In Gaza, on the other hand, even if people attempt to flee, the denial of the right of return, already announced by Israel, prevents Palestinians from leaving and then returning to their homes, leaving them trapped in a desperate and inescapable situation.

International Justice: Always too late, but nonetheless necessary

International tribunals took years to deliver justice to some of the architects of the genocide. The ICTY helped define jurisprudence on genocide and accountability norms. Karadžić, Mladić, and Milošević were captured and tried. But survivors had to wait far too long. Many responsible individuals remain free. And the genocide remains unrecognized in parts of Bosnia and the region.

While it is not the role of humanitarian workers to enforce justice, it is part of the humanitarian challenge: not to deliver justice directly but to preserve memory, provide evidence, defend the truth, and ensure that survivors have a space to express themselves.

What have We really learned? From Srebrenica to today: The echoes are loud

As we commemorate this 30th anniversary, we are haunted by similar moral crises: in Gaza, Sudan, Tigray, and Myanmar, civilians are systematically targeted, deprived of food, displaced, and bombed, often in full view of the world. Are we prepared to speak clearly when we see patterns of extermination? How can we challenge the duplicity of governments? Can we continue to pay any price, accept unacceptable conditions, just to gain access to populations in need?

The responsibility to remember and act

Honouring the victims of Srebrenica today must be more than a mourning ritual. It must serve as institutional memory for humanitarian organizations. If we say “never again,” we must act accordingly, recognizing, thirty years later, the early signs of atrocities in other crises, resisting political pressures that seek to downplay them, and demanding action, even when it jeopardizes our access.

Because the next Srebrenica won't always come with sirens. It often creeps in slowly and then manifests in all its brutality at once: while the world debates semantics, waits for verification, or simply decides to look the other way.

About the Author

Eric Stobbaerts was General Coordinator of MSF in the former Yugoslavia from late 1993 to early 1995 and worked in Srebrenica. He was also General Director of MSF in Spain from 1998 to 2004. He is a humanitarian strategy specialist with over 25 years of experience in global health and conflict situations, and has since held several senior leadership positions with Médecins Sans Frontières and the Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative (DNDi).