

Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “A Profound and Pressing Obligation”



This week, I met with representatives of survivors' associations from Srebrenica and Podrinje. Nothing can begin to assuage the grief of those who continue to this day to suffer because of the genocide perpetrated in and around Srebrenica in July 1995. This does not mean that we throw up our hands as if we were helpless – everything possible must be done to support those who survived the massacre and everything possible must be done to sustain the human and material recovery of the community in Srebrenica.

Justice comes before all else. In 2005 the RS Government Working Group produced names of members of all military, police and civil defence units that were present in the Srebrenica area at the time of the massacre. Courts of law have a duty to determine whether each individual on this list is or is not guilty of war crimes. This legal determination must be reached as a matter of the utmost urgency, first in regard to individuals employed by State or Entity institutions, and then in regard to the other individuals on this list.

Every decent citizen in every part of Bosnia and Herzegovina will join the survivors of Srebrenica in demanding that this judicial process is accelerated. Justice delayed is justice

denied – and in the wake of Europe's worst atrocity since the Second World War, justice denied is nothing short of intolerable.

Srebrenica, like other areas of return in Bosnia and Herzegovina, has benefited from significant aid and investment aimed at resuscitating the economic infrastructure to ensure that returnees have the physical and economic means to rebuild their lives. There must now be a focus on consolidating and fostering the first fruits of economic recovery. At the same time, education, memorial and reconciliation projects must be expanded.

Return is a fundamental right that can only be upheld through practical means. No one should sneer at the legitimacy or the efficacy of practical steps to restore industry, agriculture and infrastructure in Srebrenica. This is not a plaster for a gaping wound; it is a necessary foundation for the long, slow process of recovery.

Following the ruling of the International Court of Justice there have been calls for Srebrenica to be granted a special constitutional status. I have discussed this issue with party leaders and I have made it clear that this and other constitutional proposals (including proposals that can help lift Bosnia and Herzegovina out of poverty, slash crime and corruption and pave the way for full EU membership) can only be taken forward through consensus. The principle of consensus has kept the peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the past twelve years and it is not going to be abandoned.

The survivors of Srebrenica are right to demand justice, and they are right to demand that State and Entity authorities fulfil their commitments to help them improve their living conditions. The international community will stand with them in pressing these demands.

Politicians in the Federation have been accused of exploiting

the grief of survivors for their own ends, and politicians in Republika Srpska have been accused of failing to understand that their obligation in respect of Srebrenica – where an atrocity was perpetrated in the name of Republika Srpska – is not simply political; it is moral. In both cases, some of the criticisms have merit. In both cases, politicians have to focus on practical steps to accelerate justice and improve the quality of life in Srebrenica and surrounding areas. Next week my Office will bring together all the relevant agencies to make sure that these practical steps are taken.

This will not – and cannot – assuage the grief of the survivors of Srebrenica. But it can make their lives easier. By finally closing the net on perpetrators who continue to walk free and by improving conditions on the ground, the authorities will begin to fulfil a profound and pressing obligation towards the victims of genocide. We will do everything in our power to ensure that this is done.

Christian Schwarz-Schilling is the international community's High Representative and the European Union's Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina.