

Alija Izetbegović's Speech at the OSCE Meeting

Helsinki, 9th July 1992

“It is a great honour for me to be able to address this historic meeting in the name of the citizens and peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia and Herzegovina is joining this great community of peoples and countries, thus becoming part of the process of building a new Europe and a new world order, of which the foundations were laid here in Helsinki.

I should like to take this opportunity to affirm Bosnia and Herzegovina’s adherence to the democratic principles and human rights set out in the documents of the European Conference on Security and Cooperation, and above all in the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Charter.

Bosnia and Herzegovina undertakes to observe the policy of mutual security, including the Agreement on Nuclear Arms Limitation, together with other instruments in this domain. It is our constant aspiration to become, one day, a demilitarized country. We also commit ourselves to take an active part in seeking a political solution to the Yugoslav crisis through the European Community’s Conference on Yugoslavia under the mandate of the OSCE. We shall honour the commitments arising from that Conference as they relate to the crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia and Herzegovina will respect the independence, territorial integrity and borders of all its neighbouring states, as laid down by the UN Charter and the basic documents of the OSCE. Bosnia and Herzegovina will continue to build democratic institutions and contribute to the process of European security and cooperation. Unfortunately, at present its ability to do so is severely restricted.

From the very moment of being recognized as an independent state by the European Community, Bosnia has been the victim of aggression by Serbia, Montenegro and the Yugoslav Army. The aggression intensified when Bosnia and Herzegovina became a member of the OSCE, and became even fiercer and more brutal when it was admitted to membership of the United Nations.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has been rendered incapable of providing its citizens with the benefits of freedom, independence and international recognition.

Bosnia did not merely come into being after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. It was already an independent European kingdom six centuries ago. It straddled the boundary between

the Greek and the Latin churches, with their different spiritual orientations, and was recognized then by her neighbouring states, including the Holy See and its leader.

Then followed centuries of turbulent history, of which the result was Bosnia and Herzegovina as a multi-national, multi-religious and multi-cultural entity. It is with pride that we highlight this aspect of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and with justification that we say to foreigners that we are a corner of Europe in the Balkans. But all this has now been called into question.

Bosnia has become the battleground of genocide. It is now a country of concentration camps. Schools and sports stadiums have become torture chambers and sites of mass murders. You have seen on your television screens the images of the massacre in Sarajevo. But you have not seen the seven children killed by a shell a few days ago in the suburbs of Sarajevo as they picked cherries. You have not seen the mass graves in other parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even we do not know exactly what is happening there, for entire regions are cut off and all the telecommunications and television links with Sarajevo have been destroyed.

Not a single international humanitarian organisation or reporter has been allowed to visit the occupied areas where, according to the deeply disturbing and moving accounts of surviving refugees, mass expulsions and murders are being carried out. Permit me to mention only the town of Prijedor, from which 13 truck-loads of corpses were removed for burial in mass graves.

What we know for sure is that Bosnia and Herzegovina is being treacherously attacked by Serbia and Montenegro, and that the aggressor forces have not withdrawn from Bosnia despite all the Resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council, the demands of the European Community and the promises issuing from Belgrade. An unprecedented sleight of hand has taken place: the army has merely changed its name, being no longer the Yugoslav but now the Serbian Army. Some 80,000 troops have remained in Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with more than 600 tanks, a huge quantity of heavy weapons and equipment and 50 fighter aircraft. It is still, to this day, one of the most heavily armed forces in Europe.

It was this force, in complicity with the plan for the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia, that swept down upon the innocent Bosnians and Herzegovinians. For our part, we had not prepared ourselves for war, but for peace. The result is that our towns and cities are occupied, under siege and destroyed, our villages burned out, our population displaced. One in three of the inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina have been forced to leave hearth and home and join the millions-strong refugee columns.

Dear presidents, prime ministers and friends, it is not only Bosnia that is being defended in Bosnia. It is Europe that is being defended in Bosnia. The Helsinki Final Act, the Paris Charter and other instruments that Europe has sworn to uphold are being defended in Bosnia. If Bosnia is not saved, then these charters, acts and instruments are meaningless.

We are trying, out of some kind of mad hope, to preserve the vision of civil and cosmopolitan Bosnia and Herzegovina. But this will be impossible without international support. We are immeasurably grateful for the humanitarian aid that you are sending us. But this cannot save Bosnia from aggression. Aggression and its aftermath cannot be eliminated by charitable hand-outs: this is the message that I bring you from the citizens of my country.

Thank you.”