

Alija Izetbegović's Speech at the United Nations General Assembly

New York, 27th September 1994

"I come from Bosnia and Herzegovina, a distant country much talked about these days.

Unfortunately, I must begin my address by repeating some facts that are, or should be already known to most of you.

When Yugoslavia was inexorably breaking up, a little more than three years ago, we did everything we could to ensure that the dissolution would take place in a peaceful fashion, without violence.

When Slovenia and Croatia left and the dissolution of Yugoslavia became an inevitability, we organised a referendum to decide the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina democratically. The citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina went to the polls on 1 March 1992 and voted by an almost two-thirds majority of the entire registered electorate for the independence of the country. There followed not only the international recognition of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also the aggression. The decision on recognition was taken on 5 April, and published the following day, 6 April 1992. The aggression against Bosnia by Serbia and Montenegro began on 5 April, the very day that the decision to recognise the state was taken.

This aggression has been going on, with greater or lesser intensity, ever since then, without any prospect of soon coming to an end.

The war forced upon Bosnia and Herzegovina and its people, which has entered its 31st month, is one of the bloodiest in the history of mankind.

The results of this unequal struggle are: 70 % of the country's territory was occupied in the very first months of the war, more than 200,000 civilians have been killed, more than 1,000,000 of the country's inhabitants (that is, one quarter of the population) have been forced to leave their homes, and hundreds of towns and villages are in ruins.

So this has not been a classic war between two armies. It has been a war of an army against civilians, accompanied by genocide and the unprecedented destruction of cultural and religious buildings.

The world has not responded appropriately to this barbarism. Terrified by the brutality of the attack, or morally and psychologically unprepared, or even embroiled in their own conflicting interests, the world has merely appeared confused and indecisive. Even when the images and news of new concentration camps in the heart of Europe appeared, the general public was shocked, but people in positions of responsibility for the most part remained silent. Tens of thousands of people have been killed in those concentration camps, and there is no trace of thousands of others.

The crueller the attacks, the more the world vacillated.

The free world did not defend and safeguard freedom.

Our people, faced with the threat of annihilation, resolved to defend themselves. But they then came up against another absurdity. They found their hands tied. For before the war began, the United Nations adopted the famous Resolution that banned the import of arms into the entire territory of former Yugoslavia. Then everything changed. The war began. Attackers and victims appeared on the scene, but the arms embargo remained exactly the same, as if nothing had changed in the meantime. Justice turned onto blatant injustice. The attacking forces had arms – they had been stockpiling them for 40 years – and the victims were unarmed, left with their hands tied behind their backs.

The Resolution on the arms embargo turned into the very reverse. By maintaining the arms imbalance, it prolonged the war, and turned peace negotiations into the dictate of the better-armed side.

We sent a message to the world: you don't have to come to our defence. But come and untie our hands, and at least allow us to defend ourselves. While our children are being killed, our women raped, all that we hold sacred reduced to ruins, recognise our right to defend ourselves.

However, the arms embargo is still in place today. Practically speaking, our troops are fighting against artillery and tanks with only the rifles they carry. We have lost many soldiers. Reliable statistics show that 90 % of them have been killed by tank and artillery shells. Our cities, towns and villages are left at the mercy of this merciless powerful machinery in the hands of murderers.

In the city of Sarajevo alone, more than 10,000 people have been killed and more than 50,000 wounded. There is hardly a family without casualties, killed or wounded.

And the only message we have received from the world on all this is: negotiate!

Believing that the only justified path was to continue to defend our country and that the freedom-loving world would come to our assistance in that just struggle, we refused for a long time to negotiate.

Finally, faced with the unendurable sufferings of the people and the indifference of the world, we had no choice but to agree to negotiate.

It was soon clear that the attackers were using negotiations merely as a way to buy time and as a cover for continuing the aggression. In March 1993, after long and difficult negotiations, and many concessions on our part, we signed the Vance-Owen Plan. The attackers refused to sign.

There followed another bloody round of war, and then yet another round of talks.

The result was the peace plan of the Contact Group of five countries (the USA, Great Britain, France, Germany and Russia) of July this year.

This time, too, we opted for peace. And this time, too, the attackers opted for the war to continue. We accepted a blatantly unjust peace offer in order to bring the war to an end. We did so because we believed that an unjust peace plan could be rectified during the years of peace. Knowing the soul of Bosnia, we believed, and still believe, that peace will save but war will destroy what we call Bosnia.

And what we call Bosnia is not merely a slip of land in the Balkans. For many of us, Bosnia is an idea. It is the belief that people of different religions, nations and cultural traditions can live together. If it were to happen that that idea were buried for ever, and if that dream of tolerance between people in this region were to vanish never to return, the blame will lie with those who have been killing Bosnia with their artillery for 30 months, but no less with the many world powers that could have helped, but refused to do so.

I left Sarajevo two days ago. I did not leave by air, because the airport is closed. I left by mountain and forest roads, which are under constant fire and where people are killed daily. For days now the city has had no electricity, water or gas...The city is completely cut off, and is literally dying.

Nothing has been done.

Yesterday, when I came to this building, I received a letter from Srebrenica, a town on the Drina that has been surrounded since the beginning of the war. It should have been a report, but it is, rather, a cry from a true living hell. I could not find the strength to read the letter again.

A new wave of ethnic cleansing has been going on for three months now. Thousands of civilians whose only crime is that they are not Serbs have been forced to leave their homes in Banja Luka, Bijeljina, Janja and other towns under the control of Karadžić's army.

And again, nothing has been done. It is as if the world were gradually becoming accustomed to allowing the most fundamental norms of international law to be violated. This is a sick condition, and one that is the concern of every man and woman in the world, no matter how near to or how far from Bosnia they may be.

I refused for a long time, and I still refuse, to believe in conspiracy theories, that is, in the explanation that all this is happening in Bosnia because it has a majority Muslim population and that some dark forces are deliberately inciting the Serbs to annihilate the Bosnian Muslims.

Those who make this claim have their own arguments. I believe you have heard them. For it is obvious that Bosnia is in the grip of overt aggression accompanied by genocide, concentration camps and other forms of the most sinister fascism. The world would have to be blind not to see this. Either it is blind, or it is consciously accepting this evil. Since it is not blind, there remains only the second possibility. This is how they argue, and more and more people are coming to believe it every day. It would not be well if the billion Muslims of the world were all to accept this argument.

The latest events relating to the Contact Group Peace Plan have added to the armoury of arguments of the adherents of the 'conspiracy theory'.

For five great powers are behind the proffered peace plan for Bosnia and Herzegovina, which means the majority of the international community. It was explicitly stated that any party rejecting the plan would be punished and the party accepting it would be protected. What happened, however, was the reverse: the Serbs rejected the plan and were rewarded with a suspension of sanctions. We accepted the plan and were punished by Sarajevo's being totally cut off from the outside world. These processes unfolded simultaneously and in parallel.

The message we are receiving from the most senior positions in the United Nations is: if you call for and obtain a lifting of the arms embargo, United Nations troops will withdraw from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I have not, of course, made this long and exhausting journey from Bosnia to America solely to inform you of facts that are already known to the majority of you. We in Bosnia believe that good and justice cannot be defeated, whatever the obstacles and difficulties. We have not yet lost our belief that the world can be better and that we must always strive anew for this. It is with this conviction that I have come to address you and to present our proposals, despite all the disappointments and frustrations we have experienced.

We call upon this Assembly and upon the Security Council:

1. To implement all the Resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council on Bosnia and Herzegovina;
2. To introduce effective measures to control the borders between Serbia and Montenegro on the one hand and Bosnia and Herzegovina on the other and to prevent or to discover in time the cross-border transport of troops, arms and military equipment;
3. In the event that such transport is discovered, to annul forthwith the decision on the suspension of certain sanctions against Serbia (Security Council Resolution No. 943) and to introduce the stricter sanctions set out in the Contact Group Plan of July 1994;
4. Under no circumstances, to further ease the sanctions against Serbia and Montenegro until these countries recognise Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia;
5. Forthwith to adopt a resolution to reinforce the protection of and to extend the Safe Areas of Security Council Resolution Nos. 824 and 836, in accordance with the commitments set out in Point 6 of the Contact Group Plan;
6. To adopt a decision to prevent the throttling of Sarajevo. These measures should include provision for the city to be opened along the northern lines of road communications by the creation of a 2.5 kilometre demilitarised zone on either side of these roads. Only United Nations troops and police should remain in the demilitarised zone. The possibility of using force to prevent the throttling of Sarajevo is envisaged in Paragraph 4 of the NATO Decision of 9 February 1994.

On these conditions, and on condition that UNPROFOR continues to fulfil its mission, the Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina would be willing to accept a new and modified formula for the arms embargo issue. We would in this case limit our demand for the arms embargo to be lifted only to the adoption of a formal decision, with the implementation of the decision postponed for six months.

In this case, United Nations troops could remain in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Contact Group would have fulfilled its promise, and Karadžić's Serbs would be sent a clear message.

I should like finally to set out our two fundamental commitments:

1. Our non-negotiable objective is a democratic Bosnia and Herzegovina within its internationally recognized borders and with national, religious and political rights for all its citizens. In such a Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Serbs could have the right to the highest degree of autonomy, but could not have their own state within a state.
2. We believe that, like every other nation, we have the inalienable right to self-defence. For this reason, if our compromise proposal on the arms embargo is not accepted for any reason whatsoever, we shall call upon our friends to lift the embargo immediately, even if they must do so unilaterally.

Finally, I take this opportunity to thank all the friends of Bosnia and Herzegovina who support her struggle for survival and freedom."