Weekly Briefing

Bosnia-Herzegovina social briefing: Marking the anniversaries of war crimes in the context of Bosniak-Croat relations

Faruk Borić
Marking the anniversaries of war crimes in the context of Bosniak-Croat relations

Summary

On the same day, two villages, one in Bosnia and the one in Herzegovina, marks the anniversaries of the war crimes committed to the population of these villages. The Bosniak village of Ahmići is the site of the killing of 116 civilians of all ages. In Croatian village Trusina 15 civilians and 7 captured members of the Croatian Defence Council (Hrvatsko vijeće obrane – HVO), Croatian forces in Bosnia, were executed. The surviving victims of Ahmići are witnessing horrific war crime stories for which former Croat leader in BiH Dario Kordić was convicted. Members of the Army of the Republic of BiH (Armija Republike Bosne i Hercegovine – ARBiH) were convicted for war crimes in Trusina. The attitude towards the past, the issue of crimes committed by members of one's own ethnic group and other people's victims, burdens today's relations between the two peoples in the Federation of BiH.

Introduction

April 16, 2022 marked the 29th anniversary of the war crime committed in the village of Ahmići. In the village in central part of Bosnia, administratively today's Central Bosnia Canton (Srednjo-Bosanski kanton - SBK), members of the HVO killed 116 civilians. Victim’s families gathered in their association regrets that very few people have been convicted for the killings of these civilians: one person under command responsibility and only a few perpetrators. Families also said that they are the most worried with the fact that the remains of all victims were not found after all these years.

Less than a hundred kilometers south is the village of Trusina. It is a place of suffering for local Croats, 15 civilians and 7 captured soldiers which was committed on the same day like Ahmići massacre, April 16, 1993. Some perpetrators of this war crime, members of the Military Unit "Zulfikar", unit under command of ARBiH, have been sentenced by the Court of BiH, but

---

the trial of their commander, Zulfikar Ališpago, is at a standstill “due to the illness of the accused” since 2018.2

The village is located in north of Herzegovina region, today's administratively Herzegovina-Neretva Canton (*Hercegovačko-neretvanski kanton* - HNK). Nobody lives in the village today.

**Ahmići**

Enisa Ahmić, survivor of Ahmići, had lost 48 members of her family. Among them was a three-month-old baby. During this year’s ceremony she says that it is a consolation for the survivors when they find a bone so that they can bury it with dignity3. It is extremely difficult to find the remains of those killed due to the fact that the victims were moved to secondary graves, far from the crime scene. Recently, the remains of nine victims were identified. They were found in 1998 in the area near Mostar, more than 200 kilometers from the crime scene. In addition to the this nine recently identified, the remains of another 19 victims are being searched for. Families urged greater involvement of the state authorities recently4.

Before the outbreak of the war, the United Nation Protection Forces (UNPROFOR) were deployed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and soldiers from Great Britain were stationed in Central Bosnia. That is why the colonel of the British army in the composition of UNPROFOR, Bob Stewart, was the first one to enter into village of Ahmići and saw horrible images of crimes. Colonel Stewart was in Ahmići with his soldiers on April 16 2022 again, where he paid tribute to the victims.

"I was the British commander at the UN at the time in Bosnia and my people were horrified. We took more than 100 bodies, mostly women and children, and took them to a city Vitez where we dug graves to bury them. Someone said ‘take them out of the bags’ because we put them in the body bags that our battalion always had with it", Stewart said to media5.

---


3 Crime in Ahmići 29 years later: Consolation is also one bone found under the tombstone. [https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/svijet/zlocin-u-ahmicima-29-godina-poslijedne-utjeha-je-i-jedna-pronadjena-kost-ispod-nisana/220416033](https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/svijet/zlocin-u-ahmicima-29-godina-poslijedne-utjeha-je-i-jedna-pronadjena-kost-ispod-nisana/220416033)

4 Anniversary of the crimes in Ahmići: Search for the missing even after 29 years. [https://bljesak.info/vijesti/crna-kronika/godisnjica-zlocina-u-ahmicima-potraga-za-nestalim-i-nakon-29-godina/380110](https://bljesak.info/vijesti/crna-kronika/godisnjica-zlocina-u-ahmicima-potraga-za-nestalim-i-nakon-29-godina/380110)

5 A frightening and painful confession of the British commander from Ahmići.
The leader of the Islamic Community in BiH, reis-l-ulema Husein ef. Kavazović attended the commemoration of the anniversary also. He addressed in the mosque in Ahmići: "For our state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, for our generations, we must look for ways to reconcile. We must look for ways to lend a hand to each other. Not to forget. We cannot forget, but we must move on. This is our homeland."

The Chairman of the Presidency of BiH, Šefik Džaferović, also attended the anniversary ceremony: "It also hurts that the bodies of all the victims have not been found. 29 years was enough for all those who took part in this heinous crime to be brought to justice and to find out where the bodies of those killed were."

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) sentenced Croat civil and military leaders in Central Bosnia: Dario Kordić to 25 years in prison for crimes committed in Central Bosnia, including Ahmići, Miroslav Bralo to 20 years, while Vladimir Šantić was sentenced to 18 years and Drago Josipović to 12 years of prison. The Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina sentenced Paško Ljubičić to ten years for the crimes in Ahmići.

Trusina

The war crime in Trusina took place in the morning of April 16, 1993, and was committed by members of the “Zulfikar” Special Unit of the ARBiH. The oldest victim was 75 and the youngest 21 years old.

Monika Šego, who was 14 when the crime in Trusina was committed, was also present at the anniversary ceremony. She left the village three days before the attack, but her 10 and 12-year-old brothers remained with her father. She says they witnessed his father's shooting.

---

6 Reis Kavazović said in Ahmići: "Revenge would be our end, let's be vigilant and ready for all challenges". [https://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest/245915/reis_kavazovic_poruchio_iz_ahmica_osveta_bi_bila_nas_kraj_budimo_budni_i_spreni_na_sve_izazove.html](https://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest/245915/reis_kavazovic_poruchio_iz_ahmica_osveta_bi_bila_nas_kraj_budimo_budni_i_spreni_na_sve_izazove.html)


8 Anniversary of the crimes in Ahmići: Search for the missing even after 29 years. [https://bljesak.info/vijesti/crna-kronika/godisnjica-zlocina-u-ahmicima-potraga-za-nestalim-i-nakon-29-godina/380110](https://bljesak.info/vijesti/crna-kronika/godisnjica-zlocina-u-ahmicima-potraga-za-nestalim-i-nakon-29-godina/380110)

The president of the Association of Families of Killed, Dead and Missing Croatian Defenders of Konjic, (city near Trusina), Dragica Tomić, said that "this crime should be a warning not to happen again and anywhere".

Emphasizing that there is no reconciliation without forgiveness, Tomić also reminded of the crime in Ahmići, and expressed her condolences and support to the families of those killed in that village10.

A delegation of the NGO, Center for Nonviolent Action was in Trusina. Its’s representative Nedžad Novalić said that the memory of the victims "cannot be ethnically or nationally limited11".

For war crimes in Trusina, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina sentenced former members of the ARBiH, Edin Džeko, to 13 years, Rasema Handanović, to five and a half years, and Nihad Bojadžić to 15 years. The Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina also sentenced Nedžad Hodžić to 12 years and Mensur Memić to ten years12. The trial of their commander is pending.

The village of Trusina according to the 1991 census, were home of 155 Croats, more than 50% of the village inhabitants. One Croatian portal from Herzegovina drew a parallel between Ahmići and Trusina, complaining that Croats from Trusina never received the media coverage of Ahmić's victims13.

Conclusion

SBK and HNK are two of the ten cantons in the Federation of BiH in which Bosniaks and Croats live mixed more than in other eight14. In both cantons, the largest number of votes on elections goes to ethnically profiled parties with a national sign. The war broke out in BiH in 1992, and the Yugoslav People's Army (Jugoslovenska narodna armija - JNA) and the Republic of Srpska Army (Vojska Republike Srpske - VRS) took part in the conflict at one side, while the ARBiH and the HVO were on the other. In 1993, conflicts between the ARBiH HVO broke out in Central Bosnia and Northern Herzegovina and lasted until March 1994, when

10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 29 years since the war crime in Trusina. https://www.vecernji.ba/vijesti/29-godina-od-ratnog-zlocina-u-trusini-1579257
13 The massacre in Trusina - 29 years have passed, and there are no more Croats there. https://www.brotnjo.info/2022/04/16/pokolju-trusini-proslo-je-29-godina-a-hrvata-tamo-vise-nema/
Bosniaks and Croats formed the Federation of BiH by the Washington Agreement. However, certain political misunderstandings have remained to this day, such as differing views on the future constitutional structure of BiH. Level of mistrust between ethnic communities continues to be low\(^\text{15}\). This can be seen, among other things, in relation to the past, and, as in this case, the legacy of war crimes. The legacy of war crimes is still alive because the trials demanded by the victims have not been completed, and the remains of those killed have not been found. All this will continue to burden the lives of people in local communities, especially in SBK and HNK.

\(^{15}\) The results of the elections also show that the citizens of these two cantons are mostly committed to "their" ethnic parties. The largest Bosniak party is the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), and among Croats the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). Citizens of cantons in the Federation vote for three representative bodies: the Cantonal Assembly, the House of Representatives of the Federation of BiH (entity level) and the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH (state level). In SBK, out of 30 parliamentary seats, SDA won 10 and the coalition gathered around the Croatian Democratic Union 9, and all other parties 11. (https://izbori.ba/relection_results?resId=25&langId=4#/7/206/0/0/0).

In the HNK, out of 30 parliamentary seats, the HDZ list won 13 seats, the SDA 8, and all other parties 9. (https://izbori.ba/rezultati_izbora?resId=25&langId=4#/7/207/0/0/0).

In the elections for the House of Representatives of the Parliament of the Federation of BiH from Constituency 8 (SBK), the SDA won 32.44% of the vote, and the HDZ coalition 29.09% (https://izbori.ba/rezultate_izbora?resId=25&langId=4#/4/408/0/0/0). For the same level of government in Constituency 9 (HNK), the HDZ coalition won 38.23% of the vote and the SDA 22.93% (https://izbori.ba/rezultati_izbora?resId=25&langId=4#/4/409/0/0/0).

The results are similar for the state level of government, although constituencies do not follow the cantonal line as in the case of elections at lower levels of government (https://www.izbori.ba/rezultate/konacni/parlament_bih/index.htm).