



**Special Adviser for the Prevention of Genocide - Keynote remarks for Srebrenica  
Heroines International Conference, July 10, 2022, 10am,  
Srebrenica Memorial Center**

Excellencies, Ladies, and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me today. Thank you, especially to the Mothers of Srebrenica. I would like to start by paying my respects to the more than 8000 fathers, sons, nephews, uncles, grandfathers, and brothers who were murdered during the genocide here.

In June 2021, as soon as the COVID restrictions were lifted, I conducted my first two official visits as Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide to two countries of great significance to my mandate, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Rwanda. The mandate of my office was created because we, as the International Community and Member States of the world failed to prevent and respond to the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, 1994 and the Srebrenica Genocide in 1995. The specifics of my mandate are strongly connected to the lessons learned from both failures.

Last year, I came here to Srebrenica, to pay respect to the victims and survivors of the Genocide and I was then privileged to meet the Mothers of Srebrenica. I also came here due to growing concerns around persistent patterns of denial of the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, as well as the glorification of war criminals, hate speech, and rhetoric of division. My visit was also aimed at contributing at advancing national reconciliation and trust-building efforts across the country, including by supporting initiatives at the local and community level.

The Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, has often acknowledged that "the past is a vital step towards rebuilding trust, and that reconciliation means rejecting denial of genocide and war crimes and of any effort to glorify convicted war criminals. It also means recognizing the suffering of all victims and survivors."

More than 75 years after the Holocaust and more than 25 years after the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the persistence of speech denying or distorting the historical facts of these events or glorifying their perpetrators is a source of serious concern that the UN system is confronting.

On July 15, 2022, next week, My Office will launch a new policy paper. A first of its kind for the United Nations, the Policy Paper entitled, *Combating Holocaust and Genocide Denial: Protecting Survivors, Preserving Memory, and Promoting Prevention* that addresses these pernicious trends and provides guidance for governments, the United Nations system, and other relevant actors, including social media companies, to address the phenomena of Holocaust denial and distortion and genocide denial.

The policy paper is produced in collaboration with and informed by an expert brainstorming meeting convened with the [Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights](#).

History teaches us that Genocide denial and glorification of war criminals divides people, communities, and states; it feeds on and strengthens contested narratives about the past, the present and the future. It also undermines judicial decisions and therefore undermines justice. Denying genocides and celebrating war criminals constitutes an attack on human dignity, particularly to the victims and survivors. It is unacceptable and must be confronted. We must also work on witness protection.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I met the Mothers of Srebrenica here in Potocari, the President of the Mother's Action of the Srebrenica and Zepa Enclaves, Mrs Munira Subasic, gave me a bunch of pink roses, grown in her garden. The Mothers invited me to come back on July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2022, for the commemoration.

They also gave me the flower of Srebrenica, which I have carried every day ever since, to remind me that the eleven petals, every stitch made by hand, represents 11<sup>th</sup> of July, the day we shall commemorate tomorrow, when a Genocide happened here. I also saw, here, the graveyards of toddlers, children killed in the Genocide before they could speak or walk, and I know that the white in my flower of Srebrenica represents their innocence.

Ladies and Gentlemen, The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia determined conclusively that a Genocide was committed here in Srebrenica.

We do know that all societies may have indicators of risk. The Mothers of Srebrenica told me how they have focused on raising children who were not involved in reprisals, retaliation, or revenge. In doing so they have sought to break the cycle and shown that it's how societies respond to these risks that determines if a situation escalates, including in the most serious instances, the commission of atrocity crimes, by which I mean genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The green in my flower of Srebrenica, represents the hope for the future these generations raised by the Mothers of Srebrenica hold.

This is extremely important. We see, even today, provocative incidents, messages and symbols used to inflame tensions, fear, and division between communities in Bosnia Herzegovina. Such incidents convey the following:

- They reflect great disrespect for those who should be able to grieve in dignity.
- They undermine the efforts of citizens including many that I met last time I was here who wish to heal wounds, rebuild good neighbourly relations and trust.
- They instrumentalize suffering and not coming to terms with accountability and trust building by communities.

In November 2020, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Dayton Peace Accords, the three members of the Presidency of Bosnia Herzegovina issued a joint statement highlighting the importance of:

- Intensifying “efforts to ensure that peoples and citizens can live with dignity, with mutual respect and understanding”
- Sympathizing ‘with the pain and suffering of all members of all nations and citizens’
- Showing respect to “all innocent victims of war;’ and –importantly – confirming their own personal “commitment-to create a society tailored to all its peoples and citizens, especially young people whom we want to enable to stay and have a future in their homeland.”

I urge the three Members of the Presidency to act on their official, public commitment. The people of Bosnia Herzegovina expect no less and they deserve no less.

Mothers of Srebrenica, I have worked for decades to ensure that women’s contribution to peace and the prevention of atrocity crimes is valued and not ignored.

I was taught by John Paul Lederach, the renowned peacebuilder to explore ideas through the “one thing” question: So, I asked of myself today - What one thing of God’s essence would our world miss if, say, the women had not come together to create the Mothers of Srebrenica? This is an important question. Because whatever that one thing is, it might just hold the idea of why we are all here.

I have concluded that if the Mothers of Srebrenica had not come together the world would miss a committed group of people who have made the decision to stand up for accountability, trust building and justice.

The Mothers have demonstrated, in word and deed, their commitment to accountability. They protested publicly. They were the victims and survivors who testified before the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at the Hague.

They have never given up searching for their loved ones, they have been resolute in their intention to seek truth and justice at the international level. Their role, these women, these heroines, these mothers of Srebrenica, as witnesses to a Genocide is irreplaceable and the

judgements exist not only as judicial precedents but as living documents of examples of judicial justice.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today's conference is an important opportunity to honor the victims and survivors of the Srebrenica genocide. Thousands of people are still missing. Tomorrow, we shall bury the remains of 50 loved ones found over the last year. The commitment not to forget constitutes a commitment to prevent. Accountability, and reparations for atrocity crimes is important not only to obtain justice for the victims and rebuild public trust in justice and security institutions, but also to prevent future crimes. It is also essential to avoid attribution of collective guilt. Crimes are committed by individuals, not by societies or communities.

Women play an essential role in the prevention and protection of atrocity crimes. As the first woman to serve in the role of Under-Secretary-General and Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, I have made women a key priority in the implementation of my mandate. In 2020, the Secretary-General, in his annual report on the Responsibility to Protect highlighted the role of women in atrocity prevention, setting out the many ways in which women are disproportionately affected by these crimes but also the many examples where women have been the agents of prevention. Your example as Mothers of Srebrenica has inspired many around the world in the role you have played in prevention.

Next week, I will meet women drawn from all over the world to discuss the role of women in atrocity prevention. My Office has also developed a specific *Guidance Note on addressing and Countering Gender Based Hate Speech*, to be launched next month, which looks at the gendered impact of this phenomenon, and provides recommendations to counter it, building on the global UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech for which my office is the United Nations Focal Point.

Now a word on the scarf I have donated. We call this scarf in our language of Kiswahili a Kanga or lesa. In Africa, we use this scarf, the kanga, as a head wrap, a shawl or even wear it as clothing. We also use the kanga to carry babies on our backs. No wedding is complete without a gift to the bride of a kanga, and mothers of newborn babies receive a kanga. Every mother where I come from owns a kanga, often handed down from mother to daughter.

The kanga has a very significant and symbolic role. Each kanga carries an *ujumbe*, a message, usually a proverb. We spend time choosing the most important message to pass through the gift of a kanga. So today, Mothers of Srebrenica, I bring you this kanga as my gift of a scarf. It bears the message, Mapenzi ya Mama Haina Mfano – The love of a mother has no measure – the love of a mother has no comparison.

Let me conclude by again expressing my appreciation to the organizers of this Heroines International conference, the Srebrenica Memorial Centre and the Post Conflict Research Centre.

I look forward to hearing from the different session speakers. We must keep learning. I promise you my passion, my personal support and the support of the United Nations and my Office, the Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide.

Thank you.