



UNITED NATIONS

International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals

The International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals ("Mechanism") was established on 22 December 2010 by the United Nations Security Council to continue the jurisdiction, rights, obligations and essential functions of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda ("ICTR") and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia ("ICTY") which closed in 2015 and 2017, respectively

STATEMENT

PRESIDENT

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The Hague, 31 May 2024

Judge Graciela Gatti Santana, IRMCT President **Video message for International Conference:** **War Crimes in Prijedor and its Surroundings - Messages for the Future** **Friday, 31 May 2024**

**Excellencies,
Esteemed survivors,
Ladies and gentlemen,**

I am deeply honoured to address this important gathering dedicated to discussing 'War Crimes in Prijedor and its Surroundings – Messages for the Future'. The programme for this event indeed promises to offer some fascinating perspectives and discussions. I wish to thank the City of Sarajevo, in particular Mayor Benjamina Karić, and all of the other persons and entities involved in the planning and preparations.

Although I am unable to be with you in person, I had the immense privilege of attending the related conference in Prijedor yesterday and hearing from some of the survivors first-hand, as they recounted the horrors they endured in the detention camps set up in the area. Such personal stories affect me deeply every time. I have a profound admiration for the extraordinary courage and resilience that the survivors of crimes committed during the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia continue to demonstrate, as well as their determination to seek justice.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) established that Serb forces took control of Prijedor in April 1992 and that, at the end of May 1992, exactly 32 years ago, they transported groups of non-Serb individuals to detention camps. Non-Serb residents of surrounding villages were also transferred to detention camps around the same time. Those who remained outside the camps were subjected to harassment and beatings. As was established by the ICTY, the non-Serb population of the municipality was also required to wear white armbands to distinguish themselves from Serb individuals – and it is these armbands that have become over time a symbol for the suffering endured in Prijedor, as commemorated annually on this day.

The ICTY further found that, within the confines of these camps – including Omarska, Keraterm and Trnopolje – detainees endured beatings, rape, sexual assaults, torture and executions, as well as harassment, humiliation, and psychological abuse.

The world learned of the existence of such facilities in August 1992. The shocking images of emaciated detainees spread rapidly, sparking global outrage. Together with reports of other crimes, they prompted



the United Nations Security Council to respond and led to the historic establishment of the ICTY in May 1993.

The notorious detention camps in Prijedor were just one link in the chain of atrocities committed in the area. The ICTY established that the camps were accompanied by forcible arrests, mistreatment, killings both within and outside the camps, and the destruction of religious and cultural property, forcing the Bosnian Muslim and Bosnian Croat population of the municipality to leave and forming part of a broader ethnic cleansing plan. Over 40 individuals, representing more than 25% of all ICTY indictees, were charged for their involvement in the crimes committed in the municipality of Prijedor. Ultimately, 17 individuals were convicted by the ICTY and the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (Mechanism) for these crimes. Additionally, other perpetrators have been convicted by the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The judicial findings made by the ICTY regarding the crimes committed in Prijedor were, in many respects, groundbreaking in advancing international criminal law. The pertinent ICTY cases consolidated that rape and other forms of sexual violence could amount to torture, punishable as both a war crime and a crime against humanity. They also clarified that the crime of persecution extends beyond physical violence to include harassment, humiliation, and psychological abuse. These cases have therefore significantly contributed to promoting accountability for atrocity crimes.

In addition, the irrefutable judicial findings reached by the ICTY and the Mechanism have helped to establish a solid historical record of the events that took place during the 1990s conflicts. In this regard, we all can - and must - play a role in protecting and promoting them. For its part, the Mechanism is committed to preserving the valuable legacy of these tribunals and to assisting national jurisdictions in their efforts to deliver justice for crimes committed during the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. However, it is essential that national stakeholders in the region are also actively involved in this process.

Excellencies, Esteemed survivors, Ladies and gentlemen,

I strongly believe that each of us has a responsibility to firmly reject denial, revisionism, and the glorification of convicted war criminals. These phenomena only serve to perpetuate ethnic divisions and hinder the healing process for survivors and their families, affected communities and societies at large. In this context, accepting and reflecting on the facts judicially established by the ICTY and the Mechanism is of critical importance. Only through remembering and coming to terms with the truth of what transpired in Prijedor, and more generally in the former Yugoslavia, will the process of reconciliation be advanced and the people of the region be given the future of hope and progress they deserve.

Thank you for your attention.

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