

Consultation with the local community on the RECOM Initiative

Žepče, BiH

April 28, 2010

The BiH Journalists' Association and the Croatian Association of former Detention Camp Inmates from Žepče, BiH, organized the consultation with the local community. The gathering was attended by 37 representatives of victims (in particular former detention camp inmates), non-governmental organizations, politicians, representatives of the local, cantonal, and federal authorities, and journalists. Introductory speeches were given by Borka Rudić, Secretary of the BiH Journalists Association (Sarajevo, BiH), Sudbin Musić (Prijeđor '92 Association), also a member of the Coalition for RECOM.

Opinions, Suggestions, and Recommendations of the Participants

RECOM should not only help female victims of war, but it should also offer psychological and social help to men who were victims of war.

... there are many associations of female victims of war. Women to Women, Women Victims of War, and so on... Men are a lot less protected than women. We also need psychological and social help. We need all other forms of help, so to speak. I think that RECOM should include in its mandate ways to offer psychological and social help to male victims of war. (Muriz Arapović, Association of Former Detention Camp Inmates Vareš, BiH. Consultation with the local community on the RECOM Initiative, Žepče, BiH, April 28, 2010).

RECOM should help all victims, especially former detention camp inmates, exercise their right to obtain compensation for lost property and restore their social rights.

We would like to see that all victims are identified through the work of this commission, especially former detention camp inmates. No one is talking about our rights; there are no plans in place to help us rebuild our destroyed property. While I was being held prisoner, my entire property was destroyed! It has been ten years since I came back and I haven't received any money at all to rebuild my house or my other property. (Zahid Kremić, Association of returning residents of Doboj municipality and member of the Association of Former Detention Camp Inmates of the Zenica-Doboj Canton, Doboj, BiH. Consultation with the local community on the RECOM Initiative, Žepče, BiH, April 28, 2010).

The Women's Strength Association from Zenica is experienced in dealing with female victims of war. That experience will be put at RECOM's disposal.

The main goal of the Women's Strength Association is to protect human rights... The goals of this commission that you presented to us today are completely identical to the goals we have outlined in our Statute and therefore we fully support the creation of the Regional Truth Commission. Many of our members are women who have been victims of abuse or women whose closest family members are still unaccounted for. We have had an opportunity to offer psychological and social support to women whose husbands have never been found, who have been left to themselves, without any support from society. So, we will take part actively in helping RECOM achieve its goals. (Sabiha Kurtić, president of the Women's Strength Association from Zenica, BiH. Consultation with the local community on the RECOM Initiative, Žepče, BiH, April 28, 2010).

The commission must come up with appropriate definitions of victims and former detention camp inmates. Media outlets must provide space for the presentation of victims' testimonies because nothing can be achieved without it.

First of all, it is necessary to define victims and former detention camp inmates, so that a distinction can be made between them... Can somebody be defined a victim if their family member died in a military operation as a soldier? Especially if that soldier was mobilized, fought, and died in combat (regardless of what army he was in)? Could his family be considered a family of a war crime victim?... I would like to ask the representatives of the many different associations present here today to try to separate a person's financial and social standing from the right to know the truth about someone's suffering, about whether or not someone is a victim. Let's not talk about whether that person is receiving or not receiving any help, whether or not that person is receiving or not receiving help from the government for being a registered victim. That will happen later, when the truth is established...

I am not afraid of what an investigation into war crimes will uncover... not at all... We should look back into the time when generations that went to war in 1991 were indoctrinated... it is important that the ideological premises that led to the war are identified because they

poisoned, so to speak, indoctrinated young people... Media coverage of the issue of detention camps and war crimes is very important. Every activity of RECOM must be in the media, and RECOM will have to be accepted (I hope) by government institutions. There must be someone who will say that nothing can be achieved without it. In seven days, which is the time window for public testimonies of victims, so that everyone can hear their stories (...) if those testimonies are not presented in the media, and if there is not enough pressure on the government, the whole thing will become boring for young people born after the war... with all due respect to journalists, it is necessary to find objective history teachers, psychologists, or first of all ethno-psychologists, who will be able to say that a mentality formed in this manner is able to render such and such acts (sic). (Idriz Alihodžić, assistant Chief of Staff of the Zavidovići Municipality, BiH. Consultation with the local community on the RECOM Initiative, Žepče, BiH, April 28, 2010).

RECOM is restoring the reputation and confidence in a life shared by different nations.

Why did I join RECOM? Simply because I realized that it has true potential that can help us restore good relations between nations and neighbors in this country of mine. (Zlatko Prkić, Presidency of the Croatian Association of former detention camp inmates in BiH, Vareš, BiH. Consultation with the local community on the RECOM Initiative, Žepče, BiH, April 28, 2010).

What should we do to help those who have suffered during the war and whose rights continue to be violated?

I would like to say something about RECOM and ask a question about it: What can we do to help those who suffered a lot during the war? The fact is that the current political elites haven't done much to help them. In fact, everyone suffered some pain during the war, some more, some less. I would just like to know if there is a way to form an association of former detention camp inmates from all ethnic groups, not just Croat, or Serb, or Bosniak – so that we can work together and tell everyone that we are not going to allow our human rights to be violated any longer. (Ruža Vlajković, Association of Women, Tešanj, BiH. Consultation with the local community on the RECOM Initiative, Žepče, BiH, April 28, 2010).

I am afraid that we will begin with good ideas and that over time we will get sidetracked and lost in undefined goals and expectations and that other problems and interests become visible, too.

I have some information about RECOM – some organizations joining RECOM, some leaving it – I hear all sorts of accusations with respect to how business is being conducted – and all that makes me very cautious. As an organization, we will take our time before we decide if we want to join the initiative, although, I must say, on behalf of the organization I represent and in my own name, I personally recognize that this is a very good idea promoted by RECOM. I'm just afraid that we will start with a good idea and that over time, undefined goals and expectations will sidetrack us. In such a situation, petty interests and small problems will also become visible and the idea will be destroyed even before it is fully developed. We will discuss within our organization whether we want to join and how we want to participate and be active in everything that RECOM does. (Maksuma Topalović, Alternativa non-governmental organization, Kakanj, BiH. Consultation with the local community on the RECOM Initiative, Žepče, BiH, April 28, 2010).

State sponsored projects tasked with establishing the facts about war crimes are sluggish and ill-efficient. For that reason, former detention camp inmates from Zenica support the creation of RECOM.

There are eight associations active in the Alliance, and we have concluded, after the first consultation we attended, that the Coalition for RECOM might be an initiative that can help establish the facts about war crimes and other serious human rights violations... and we have agreed to join the Coalition for RECOM. That's the decision of the Board of Directors of the Alliance of Associations of Former Detention Camp Inmates of the Zenica-Doboj Canton. This Alliance includes victims of torture: soldiers, prisoners of war, civilians and detention camp inmates. They are victims of torture who have needs and who are still being overlooked by the law. And when it comes to establishing the facts about war crimes, it [the government] is very sluggish and inefficient when it comes to the facts concerning former detention camp inmates. One of the reasons is that the position of witnesses in war crimes trials is such that people who are victims and who are motivated to speak, either 'disappear' or they change their mind about testifying when they realize the way they are being treated by the government. (Šaban Ibraković, President of the Alliance of Associations of Former Detention Camp Inmates of the

Zenica-Doboj Canton, Zenica, BiH. Consultation with the local community on the RECOM Initiative, Žepče, BiH, April 28, 2010).