

National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM

“M” Hotel
Belgrade, Serbia
April 24, 2010

A consultation on the Initiative for RECOM was organized by the Humanitarian Law Center (HLC) from Serbia and was attended by 54 participants, representing associations of the families of the killed and missing, associations of victims’, and associations of war veterans, refugees, and forcefully displaced persons. In addition, two guests from Osijek were in attendance, Miroslav Varga and Željko Mrak, both Croatian war veterans. Nataša Kandić from the HLC, a member of the Coordination Council of the Coalition for RECOM, gave an introductory speech and moderated the discussion while Marko Veličković from the Center for the Development of Civil Resources addressed the “Why RECOM” part of the discussion.

Comments, Suggestions, and Recommendations of the Participants at the Consultation:

Victims from the Second World War also need to be exhumed. This exhumation should be conducted in the presence of representatives of the international community.

The proposal is to exhume all victims from World War II and, of course, from the most recent war (...) We should ask our respective governments to finance this exhumation and to conduct it in the presence of representatives of the international community because of the possibility to misuse information. I say this because I would not believe the authenticity of information provided by some republics. (Dane Škorić, Association of Native Residents of Lapčane in Belgrade, Serbia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

The amnesty procedure is not being conducted in Croatia.

In 1991 I was commander of the Army Barracks in Slavonski Brod, Croatia when it was attacked (...) and we all ended up in prison in Slavonska Požega. For the three months we spent there in prison we were exposed to all kinds of torture, and on December 12, 1991 we were exchanged. On that occasion I was served with the indictment raised against me (...) In 1993 I was tried by the County Court in Slavonska Požega and sentenced to 15 years in prison (...) Because of the fact that I am on the Interpol Wanted List since 1991, I have been living in a political cage on the territory of the Republic of Serbia and I can't go anywhere (...) Ever since the new Amnesty Law was enacted in Croatia, only four persons' sentences were abolished, which is 0.004% of the total number of sentences against indicted individuals. (Janko Radmanović, REGION Association of Forcefully Displaced Persons and Individuals Indicted in 1991 in Croatia, Belgrade, Serbia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

It is the duty of my generation to list every victim and document everything bad that happened on our watch.

(...) I think that it is the duty of my generation, my own duty, because I took an active part in everything that happened back in those days, to give my support to the creation of a regional commission tasked with investigating every crime, listing every victim, and documenting all the bad things that happened on our watch. That's my responsibility, and that's what I want, and that's the reason I am a member of the Coalition for RECOM. I think it is very important and that it is a major contribution that my generation can make to future generations. (Miroslav Varga, Croatian homeland defender from Osijek, Croatia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

War veterans have not been asked to tell what they know about war events.

(...) It was very upsetting for me to realize that only victims and politicians talked about the war. War events were told from the point of view of victims, from the point of view of politicians and daily politics, from the point of view of upcoming elections, war reparations, or the United Nations. Everybody had their stories to tell and the only ones who were never asked about the war were the war veterans. Nobody ever asked me. For that reason I think this is a good initiative, and I participate as a war veteran because I want to say some things I believe I should have been asked to say a long time ago. (Miroslav Varga, Croatian homeland defender from Osijek, Croatia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

I want to know the truth about why my village was demolished to the ground.

There were approximately 45 Parenta family houses in Islam Latinski, surrounded from all sides by the Croatian population (...) All of our houses are gone without a trace. No one has returned to the village in 18 years, because there is no village. I just want to know, why it was demolished to the ground and why were all foundations removed? (Milan Parenta, refugee from the Zadar Municipality, Croatia, member of the Association of War Veterans from the Wars of the 1990s from the Kikinda Municipality, Serbia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

I was terribly eager to go to war.

I was raised to know about the "Informbiro," to know about the concentration camp in Jasenovac and various caves in Herzegovina and everywhere else. That's how I was raised. When the war began, I could hardly wait to go to war. I know Croatian veterans and Muslims from Bosnia (...) and back in those days, everybody was so eager to go to war. (Aleksandar Dragišić, Republic Association of War Veterans from the Wars of the 1990s, Belgrade, Serbia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

RECOM is necessary if we want to stop the cycle of revenge.

It is indispensable to materialize the Initiative for RECOM so that we can finally put an end to a cycle of revenge and the stories of victims and home-told stories. (Boris DeliĆ, Novi Most Refugee Return Service, Belgrade, Serbia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

I have been living in a collection centre and the government is doing absolutely nothing to help.

(...) we have been living in a collection centre for 11 years now and the government is doing absolutely nothing to help us find better housing. My family of five lives in a room that is 3 by 3 meters. (Milovan Radenović, a displaced person from the Kosovo Vitina/Vitia municipality, Dečji Vrtić Collection Center, Bujanovac, Serbia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

Laws need to be enacted to comply with standards for information collected by RECOM.

(...) we need new laws which will have to comply with standards for the information collected by RECOM and which everyone will have to abide by. The Coalition for RECOM should insist on the adoption of new laws and, if necessary, it should ask for the support of the international community and other humanitarian organizations. (Slobodan Kikić, Association of War Veterans from the Wars of the 1990s from Kikinda, Serbia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

If we are able to achieve justice for the victims, we will eliminate the possible recurrence of such tragic wars.

(...) if we take an active part in this project and summon all our strength towards finding the truth about the things that happened during the wars of the 1990s, and if, first of all, we are able to achieve justice for the victims, then we will eliminate the possible recurrence of such tragic wars in the future. (Radojica Bunčić, participant of the 1991-1995 war and a refugee from Croatia, Pakrac municipality, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

The commission should concentrate on witnesses who are still alive from the most recent wars.

(...) the mandate of the commission should be what is realistic to expect – interviewing witnesses who are still alive (...) A lot of innocent people were killed in World War II (...) and I don't think we should be attempting to do what is unrealistic, let's not forget that. (Dragan Pjevač, representing the Association of the Families of the Killed and Missing from Krajina, Croatia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

It is important to establish the facts about the Second World War.

I think it is very important to establish the facts from the Second World War – those that can be established, of course. I know we can't make an individualized list of the victims, but we can make a list of the locations of crimes - and they are known. We want to exhume those bodily remains and give them a proper burial. And, although they cannot be given names, they will be marked as victims. (Miodrag Linta, Serbian Democratic Forum, Belgrade, Serbia, Coalition of Associations of Refugees, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

We should be the consciousness of our nations. We should try to restore dignity to victims and secure a future for those coming after us.

It is important that we are truly determined to do what our governments failed to accomplish, what our politicians neglected, what our science and art academies did not do, and what our churches did not do – and all of them say they are truly concerned for their people and the national interests of their countries and so on. We should be the consciousness... let us do these things together so that we can preserve the dignity of victims, of those are no longer with us, and at the same time secure a better future for those who are coming after us. (Željko Mrak, Croatian veteran from Osijek, Croatia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

RECOM needs to investigate who is responsible for forced mobilization.

I received a draft notice. I was mobilized (...) I had to go (...) I did not have any motive whatsoever to go to war, but I had to be there and shoot at Željko, although I did not want to (...) Can it be included in the mandate of RECOM to investigate who was responsible for forced mobilization? I want to know who had the power or who ordered the forced mobilization. We were not at war and I am holding a gun in my hand and I have to shoot. If I don't shoot, I will be punished. (Zoran Kosić, Association of War Veterans from the Wars of the 1990s from Kikinda, Serbia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

It is necessary to investigate the causes of the armed conflict, first of all.

For that reason I would like to suggest an investigation of causes, first of all. Once we know what caused it we will be able to administer solutions. (Dragan Miljković, Association of War Veterans from the Wars of the 1990s from Lebane, Serbia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

Should the commission compile a list of possible perpetrators of war crimes and serious human rights violations?

Do you think that it would be a good idea for the commission to compile a list of possible perpetrators of war crimes and serious human rights violations, which would allow any individual who is on that list to deny allegations against him or to present evidence proving his innocence? That's something to think about because some commissions had that included in their mandate. (Nataša Kandić, Humanitarian Law Center, Belgrade, Serbia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

Compiling a list of possible perpetrators of war crimes and serious human rights violations would violate the presumption of innocence.

I would rather do it in a conventional way, preserving the presumption of innocence – innocent until proven guilty. The burden of proof cannot be on the accused (...) any possible perpetrator of war crimes and serious human rights violations should be presented with evidence proving that he or she is guilty as charged. (Željko Mrak, Croatian veteran from Osijek, Croatia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

The mandate of the commission should not be too wide.

So, I think that the mandate of the commission should not be too wide. It should be kept within the limits of establishing the victims, making a register of victims' names, establishing the circumstances surrounding their death, and listing the most drastic consequences of the armed conflict, ranging from the destruction of property, persecution, and the destruction of cultural-historical monuments and so on (...)in order to find ways to provide compensation to victims. (Drago Kovačević, Serbian Democratic Forum, Belgrade, Serbia, Coalition of Associations of Refugees, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

It is important to concentrate on establishing an individualized register of victims, on identifying detention camps, and compiling a register of former detention camp prisoners.

I believe that the Initiative for RECOM would be a complete failure if it was mandated to investigate the nature of the war, the causes of the war, and to establish who was responsible, determining levels of responsibility (...) the commission needs to concentrate on its primary mandate, which is the establishment of an individualized register of victims and the restoration of dignity to victims. Naturally, the civil society sector and this Coalition can insist on criminal prosecution of perpetrators of war crimes and serious human rights violations as an important secondary segment of the mandate of the commission. Also, another thing I like is the idea to compile a register of all detention camp locations and former detention camp inmates through a dialogue with surviving former detention camp inmates. They are the people who were humiliated and tortured only because of their national and religious backgrounds. That should be followed by a regional agreement on the proper marking of mass graves and detention locations where people were tortured and killed. If the commission is able to do these two things, it would be a significant contribution to establishing confidence between nations and to achieving reconciliation between nations living on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, as the ultimate goal of the Commission. (Miodrag Linta, Serbian Democratic Forum, Belgrade, Serbia, Coalition of Associations of Refugees, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

It is impossible to establish the causes of the war.

We have to understand that we have to live in this region together and that it is very important for future generations to know the truth – therefore we must establish the truth. It would be good, although I think it is impossible, to establish the causes of the armed conflict. That would take us to a completely different level which would be quite overwhelming for this commission. (Marinko Đurić, Association of Families of the Kidnapped and Missing from Kosovo and Metohija, Belgrade, Serbia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

It is equally as important to work on establishing the facts about the victims from the most recent wars as it is to establish the facts concerning the Second World War.

I can't just say that the victims from World War II are not important and that no one should deal with them (...) However, it is in the best interest of all to try to establish as many facts from as many different periods as possible if we truly want to achieve reconciliation between the nations. (Vladica Cvetković, Association of War Veterans from the Wars of the 1990s from Svrljig

municipality, Serbia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

The mandate of the commission is to establish the facts, not to interpret them.

I am not so much interested in learning the truth, because I have my own truth, as I am interested in learning the facts. I want to know how many people were forcefully displaced, driven away from Lapac, Pakrac, Glina, Gvozd, and so on. I want to know those facts. I am only interested in facts. The mandate of the commission is to establish the facts and not to interpret them or give them a form (...) the job of this commission is simply to establish that on such and such day in such and such village that person was killed, driven away, raped, or suffered in any way that should not have happened. (Miroslav Varga, Croatian homeland defender from Osijek, Croatia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

The commission should have two members from each parliament – one from the ruling party or the ruling coalition and one member from opposition parties. War veterans should have their own sub-commission in RECOM.

(...) the commission must be regional, and without the political will and the political decision of all governments in the region it cannot be founded. That's why I think that politicians must have their place in it. I think it would be wise to (...) have two members from each parliament in the region as members of the commission – one from the ruling party or ruling coalition and one from opposition parties. A separate sub-commission should be formed for war veterans, because they deserve to be able to share their opinion, their understanding of the war events, and to be able to testify. Some people are refusing to tell their stories now but, one day, when somebody dies, they may be willing to say what they know because the fear will be gone. (Miroslav Varga, Croatian homeland defender from Osijek, Croatia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

It is important to make public all established facts in order to avoid various interpretations of events.

The most important task of the commission is to organize public hearings for victims and to make public all established facts in any way they can, on the Internet, in libraries, in book stores, anywhere where those who want to learn the truth can find it easily. Then we will be able to avoid all these terrible situations when everybody is blaming everybody else and giving their interpretation of the truth. (Miroslav Varga, Croatian homeland defender from Osijek, Croatia, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).

War veterans should name those responsible for war crimes.

(...) I think that the role of war veterans in this process (...) and I am sure that (...) we were in a position to see all kinds of things and we should not be afraid of anything, is to name those responsible for war crimes. (Radojica Bunčić, participant of the 1991-1995 war and a refugee from Croatia, Pakrac municipality, National Consultation with Veterans, Refugees, and Forcefully Displaced Persons on the Initiative for RECOM, Belgrade, Serbia, April 24, 2010).