

Consultation with the Local Community on the Initiative for RECOM

Zenica, BiH
March 6, 2010

A consultation with the local community on the Initiative for RECOM was organized by the BH Journalists Association and the Association of Former Detention Camp Inmates of the Zenica – Doboј Canton. The gathering was attended by 41 participants, mostly representatives of associations of victims, former detention camp inmates, members of non-governmental organizations, journalists, and representatives of the town of Zenica institutions (the Social Work Center and the Mental Health Center). Introductory speeches were made by Amir Kulagić, member of the Coordination Committee of the Coalition for RECOM from Srebrenica, BiH, and Nataša Kandić, from the Humanitarian Law Center in Serbia, who informed the participants of the up-to-date course of the consultation process. The discussion was moderated by Borka Rudić, Secretary General of the BH Journalists Association (BiH).

Opinions, Suggestions, and Recommendations of the Participants

The terrible experiences of victims must be documented and told, as a reminder to future generations.

Victims of torture, persecution, and rape, as well as the families who lost their loved ones – they can never forget what they went through, and they live with their pain, their secrets, pain, and their losses every day. Their experience must be thoroughly investigated, and all the facts must be established, documented, and interpreted in an impartial, truthful, and honest manner. Their terrible experiences must be told and documented as a painful reminder for new generations to avoid such suffering. (Amir Kulagić, member of the Coordination of the Coalition for RECOM, Srebrenica, BiH, Consultation with the Local Community on the Initiative for RECOM, Zenica, BiH, March 6, 2010).

For former detention camp inmates the most significant issue remains having their status regulated by law. RECOM can help the voice of the former detention camp inmates be heard.

I would like to send a message from this gathering - that no one is allowed to speak on my behalf because I am the one who suffered. I can give a mandate or an authorization to someone to represent me. So, it is a message for those preparing for elections: you can't speak on my behalf and on behalf of those I represent - former detention camp inmates; you can't speak about me or us, whether there is a thousand, two, five, or ten thousand of us. (Zahid Kremić, president of the Association of Returning Refugees of the Municipality of Doboј, BiH, Consultation with the Local Community on the Initiative for RECOM, Zenica, BiH, March 6, 2010).

One of RECOM's assignments, how I understood it and how I think it should work, is that we have our representative who will speak on our behalf. In this situation we are in an under-privileged position, we are under everyone's foot and we are not recognized as victims by the law or in the society, while all other victims have something somewhere. Many people discuss our situation, they talk about us, I don't remember if it was the Pošteno TV show, or another

inappropriate TV show, produced on our account. And we are nowhere, that's the rule. (Nazif Bajrić, representative of former detention camp inmates, Visoko, BiH, Consultation with the Local Community on the Initiative for RECOM, Zenica, BiH, March 6, 2010).

Former detention camp inmates are destitute; we are as poor as church mice in each and every community. As my colleague just said – there is no law. It's as simple as that – we can't even register all former detention camp inmates. Apart from this, Maglaj was under siege for nine months so that even our fellow-citizens from Maglaj do not recognize us as victims saying: "We were prisoners too; we have spent nine months under siege." However, I think it is not quite true. We are destitute, we receive no compensation for our suffering, we receive no compensation for lost property and destroyed houses. We are at the bottom of the barrel. (Ramiz Mačković, president of the Association of Former Detention Camp Inmates, Maglaj, BiH, Consultation with the Local Community on the Initiative for RECOM, Zenica, BiH, March 6, 2010).

The most important thing would be – and everybody agrees – at least those who were in detention camps – to include former detention camp inmates in some law, so that we have a legal status, so that we are like everybody else. (Bekir Menzilović, president of the Association of Former Detention Camp Inmates, Kakanj, BiH, Consultation with the Local Community on the Initiative for RECOM, Zenica, BiH, March 6, 2010).

We should exert pressure on our governments to acknowledge the existence and suffering of these people in the law, to dedicate them at least one article recognizing the fact that they remained alive but that they suffered a lot of pain, distress, and misfortune in the period 1992-1995. They need it to feel like other citizens of this country. Those people should be given space and this commission should definitely focus on cooperation with executive and judicial branches of our governments to make sure this population is given some structure and granted some rights. It is not only a financial issue – those people need to be offered moral support. (Tahir Mandžuka, president of the Association of the Families of Šehids and Killed Veterans, Kakanj, BiH, Consultation with the Local Community on the Initiative for RECOM, Zenica, BiH, March 6, 2010).

RECOM should include women who are victims of rape in house-detention situations as well as men who still refuse to talk about it.

The question I would like to ask representatives of RECOM is: Is RECOM only going to be dealing with those victims who have been registered in various detention camps or is it going to analyse the situation of victims who have suffered torture and trauma but they were not registered in detention camps? When I say this I have in mind a number of women who suffered the war trauma of rape in house-detention situations, regardless of whether they were taken away or abused in such detention locations. It would be very useful for them if the Coalition of RECOM included them in their program, along with the men who suffered the same kind of humiliation but still refuse to speak publicly about it or who have not been registered yet. (Sabiha Husić, Director of the non-governmental organization Medica, Zenica, BiH, Consultation with the Local Community on the Initiative for RECOM, Zenica, BiH, March 6, 2010).

RECOM must be independent from any kind of influence and all important decisions in RECOM should be made by victims.

RECOM must be strictly, clearly, and precisely defined and it must be fully independent from any kind of personal influence. It should be run primarily by people who have gone through all those forms of suffering because they are the ones who can testify most truthfully about those forms of abuse. (Sead Drljo, president of the Society of Social Workers, Zenica, BiH, Consultation with the Local Community on the Initiative for RECOM, Zenica, BiH, March 6, 2010).

Our past is a black book which must be read out loud by RECOM so that the whole world can read it and learn the truth.

I see all of us as a living black book which wanders throughout the region of the former Yugoslavia. The people who are going to be here must find the strength to read that black book to the whole world. If the book is not read, there can be no truth in this region! I would like to ask RECOM and all the people who are going to be in RECOM, to mobilize all available potential and make sure the book is read all over the region and world because that book is the truth. And the stories of those who represent us – that's a farce! Thanks to the way they do things, we are still victims even today! (Nazif Bajrić, Association of Former Detention Camp Inmates, Visoko BiH, Consultation with the Local Community on the Initiative for RECOM, Zenica, BiH, March 6, 2010).

Only RECOM can make the voice of victims and witnesses heard.

What the ICTY does not have, and what state-organized trials don't have, are these testimonies of victims and witnesses. These testimonies are going to be organized all over the region because deposing victims and witnesses is the essence of the work of all truth commissions. (Nataša Kandić, Humanitarian Law Center, Belgrade, Serbia, Consultation with the Local Community on the Initiative for RECOM, Zenica, BiH, March 6, 2010).

Victims who lost their lives while standing in line for bread or milk or being in the wrong place at the wrong time make those crimes particularly gruesome.

When I look at wars and war-related events everywhere in the world throughout history, many of those who were never captured and who never participated in the fighting, who were never on the front lines but who were killed while waiting in line for bread or milk, or who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, like those who were standing in front of the Bosanka department store at the time the grenade was fired there, were never registered as victims. However, I think that those victims are very important and RECOM should by all means take care of them although they may be politically unimportant victims, so to speak. But, in addition to the obvious, those victims are important because they are civilian victims of the war and, as a matter of fact, they add to the political dimension of the crime. (Duška Andrić-Ružičić, Association of Women INFOTEKA, Zenica, BiH, Consultation with the Local Community on the Initiative for RECOM, Zenica, BiH, March 6, 2010).

Former detention camp prisoners understand each other perfectly well regardless of their religion and nationality. Problems occur when politics get in the middle.

What can be concluded from the contacts with former detention camp inmates is that, regardless of whether they are from Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina, or Croatia, they

understand each other perfectly well. Bosniaks understand Catholics and Eastern Orthodox prisoners and the other way round. There's no question about it. Problems occur when politicians come in the middle. If RECOM is able to exclude politics from this whole process, its success is guaranteed. (Samir Pojskić, Cantonal Association of Former Detention Camp Inmates of the Zenica-Doboj Canton, BiH, Consultation with the Local Community on the Initiative for RECOM, Zenica, BiH, March 6, 2010).

Former detention camp inmates expect to be recognized as victims. For them it is the main possible moral and human satisfaction.

I need to hear: Yes, Sir, you were a victim of torture and crime. That is what every former detention camp inmate expects to hear. (Samir Pojskić, Cantonal Association of Former Detention Camp Inmates of the Zenica-Doboj Canton, BiH, Consultation with the Local Community on the Initiative for RECOM, Zenica, BiH, March 6, 2010).

International standards should be applied in defining different categories of victims such as civilian victims or sexual abuse victims, as well as different categories of detention locations such as camps or collection centres.

In its final report RECOM should make a legend of the different concepts, such as the concept of a victim or a detention location. The safest way is to apply internationally recognized standards and definitions. But before that, a precise definition of these important categories must be established. It must be clear what is a victim, what is a civilian victim, what is a sexual abuse victim, what is a forceful detention victim, and so on. And again, international standards and definitions can help in the process. (Amir Kulaglić, member of the Coordination of the Coalition for RECOM, Srebrenica, BiH, Consultation with the Local Community on the Initiative for RECOM, Zenica, BiH, March 6, 2010).