

WHITE RIBBONS AGAINST GENOCIDE DENIAL (Bosnia/Serbia)

Human rights activists from over 50 countries are showing their solidarity with the wartime victims from the town of Prijedor, who were banned from publicly commemorating their suffering by the town's mayor.

31/5/2012- The organisers of the event called the 'White Ribbons Day' have asked people in Bosnia and all over the world to put a white ribbon on their arms or white sheet on their windows on May 31 in order to show their respect for all the victims of the atrocities committed in Prijedor and around the world. Previously, the mayor of the town of Prijedor, Marko Pavic, had banned the gathering of the families of the victims, who wanted to commemorate the deaths of Bosniaks and Croats killed in the town during the war, saying that such event would "undermine the town's reputation". Pavic objected to Bosniak organisations describing the killings as genocide. In his statement he said that he cannot endorse such terminology and that the genocide in Prijedor has not been proven, accusing the organisations of politicising the commemoration. Refik Hodzic from the International Centre for the Transitional Justice says that Pavic violated the victims' right to remembrance. "Marko Pavic cannot decide on behalf of the victims how they should name the commemoration of their suffering. They did not violate any law of Bosnia and Herzegovina by naming the commemoration 'the 20 years from genocide'," explains Hodzic.

The supporters of the White Ribbons Day were especially irritated because on Wednesday the municipality of Prijedor marked the 20th anniversary of the Bosnian army attack on the town, when 15 soldiers were killed and 25 members of the Serbian forces were injured. Edin Ramulic from the victims association Izvor thinks that all the victims from Prijedor should have equal status. "It is disastrous to see that victims from another ethnic group are allowed to do what we were forbidden. The police did not deem necessary to say that the dirge performed as a memorial to Serbian victims would violate inter-ethnic tolerance, although that is what we were told when they banned us from holding the commemoration," said Ramulic. Hodzic says that the municipality's policy towards victims is just a part of the wider Republika Srpska's policy of denying the crimes committed against Bosniaks, such as the Sarajevo siege or the Srebrenica genocide. "This policy is the result of the fear of the authorities of Republika Srpska that events like this would harm their imaginary statehood. Because of the ban, the victims' commemorations need to be held in other towns such as Sarajevo or Belgrade," Hodzic says.

In Belgrade, the victims of Prijedor are honoured in two separate events - one in memory of all women raped in Prijedor during the war and the other, The White Ribbon Day, which will be held on Friday afternoon. Milos Urosevic, from the Belgrade based NGO Women in Black that organised both events, says that the aim was to remind people of the horrors of the crimes committed, noting that systematic rape was used as a weapon of war. "First we wanted to show solidarity with the people of Prijedor whose commemoration was banned. Second we wanted to tell people and the state that we do not want to forget

the crimes committed and that we do not accept the currently ongoing relativisation of the crimes,” says Urosevic. Beside Belgrade, commemorations will be held in the Bosnian towns of Sarajevo, Zenica and Sanski Most, while the event organizers have announced that activists from 54 countries will take part in marking the White Ribbons Day. NGOs and experts from both Bosnia and Serbia agree that states care only about victims from their ethnic background, but also note the absence of public support when it comes to facing the past. “Who, besides the association of victims and the NGOs in Prijedor raised their voice against Pavic’s ban? No one. Who in Belgrade joined the 'Women in Black' in their touching protest on Wednesday? No one,” concludes Hodzic.

Background of the White Ribbon in Bosnia

According to the verdicts passed down by the Hague Tribunal, ICTY, Serbian forces took over the control of the town of Prijedor in northwestern Bosnia on April 30, 1992. On May 31, the Bosnian Serb authorities issued a decree for all non-Serbs to mark their houses with white flags or sheets and to wear a white armband if they were to leave their houses. This was the first day of a campaign of extermination that resulted in executions, concentration camps in Omarska, Keraterm and Trnopolje, mass rapes and the ethnic cleansing of more than 94% of Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats from the territory of the Prijedor municipality. Members of the European Commission Monitoring Mission testified that while visiting a mixed Serb/ Muslim village as late as August 1992 they saw that the Bosniak houses were marked with white flags in order to distinguish them from Serb houses.

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