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Republican Research Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

September 23, 1992

Dear Republican Colleague:

The House Republican Research Committee's Task Force on the Balkan Crisis would like you to read the enclosed article, titled: "Bosnian Serb Police Unit Is Accused of Massacre of Muslim Prisoners," which appeared in the Washington Post on Tuesday, September 22, 1992.

This article describes the terror and death which the government of Serbia is supporting in the Republic of Bosnia and Hercegovina.

Our task force is outraged by these and other war crimes which the government of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia supports.

We will be introducing a House Resolution to break all diplomatic ties with the government of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia which is composed of the countries of Serbia and Montenegro.

If you would like to join our Republican Leadership Task Force, please contact Ron Phillips (x5-0871) at the Republican Research Committee.

Sincerely,

Susan Molinari
SUSAN MOLINARI
Chairman

Bill Zelif
BILL ZELIFF
Co-Chairman

Bosnian Serb Police Unit Is Accused Of Massacre of Muslim Prisoners

More Than 200 Men and Boys Allegedly Shot at Close Range

By Mary Battiatia
Washington Post Foreign Service

TRAVNIK, Bosnia—They were told it would be a short ride to freedom, but it ended in the disappearance of more than 200 Slavic Muslim men and boys on a Serb-controlled mountain road one month ago.

Exactly what happened on that Aug. 21 evening cannot be verified beyond doubt, but two men who say they were there have told Western reporters and Bosnian government officials in separate statements that the Muslims were massacred—shot by local Serb policemen at the edge of a steep ravine and left to tumble into a heap of bodies below.

These two accounts, supported by more than a half-dozen others from relatives who last saw the men in Serb custody near that ravine, say the missing Muslims had been released from a Serb detention camp in northwestern Bosnia earlier that day, loaded onto two buses and told they were going to be exchanged for Serb detainees held by Bosnia's Muslim-led government.

There was no exchange, and as far as their distraught relatives know, the men were never taken farther than a narrow mountain track at a place known as Varjanta, near the confluence of the Ugar and Ilomska rivers about 15 miles north of this Muslim-held city. There, according to a 20-year-old man who said he was aboard one of the buses, 10 Serb policemen ordered all the Muslims off the buses, shot them at close range and pushed them over the rim of the ravine.

"We could hear the shooting outside the bus," the 20-year-old told two reporters, one of them from The Washington Post. "I was one of the last ones off the bus. I saw three Serb policemen standing there, and in front of them there were big pools of blood."

"I decided at that moment to jump," he said. "I rolled a long way down, until I was caught on a tree. I heard shooting up above for about an hour after that. Bodies were tumbling past me. There were a lot of them."

The second reputed survivor of the incident told government officials here in Travnik that when the two buses reached the ravine, a Serb policeman told the prisoners: "This is your last stop, you are getting out." This man, a 31-year-old Muslim who identified himself with the nickname "Cerni," said in videotaped testimony that the prisoners were at first taken off the buses one by one, then in pairs, then three at a time.

"We could hear the Serbs singing out there and the shooting," Cerni told Travnik authorities in a calm, flat voice when he turned up here on Aug. 29. He said he had wandered in the forest for five days with a companion who died along the way before reaching the nearby Muslim-held town of Jajce. "Earlier in the ride," Cerni said, [the Serbs] were telling us we would be exchanged for Serb prisoners. But I told one of my cousins, Casim, who also died that day, that nothing would come of this. I said, 'It is our last day.'"

"Casim said, 'You shut up, it won't be like this.' But then they stood us in two lines on the edge of the canyon. [The policeman in charge] stood on one side and raised his gun, and another person . . . aimed, too. And then they started shooting."



"I was at the far end of the line," Cerni said. "I jumped as soon as they started. I protected my head and arms and tumbled down. When I stopped, the other bodies were falling on me. The blood was all over, and an older man was calling to me, 'Help me, son. Help me, son.' But no one dared to stand up or move. My leg was bleeding. I lay there and waited for dark. It finished very badly. The other people from the concentration camp were all killed at this place."

A representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross in the Travnik region, Eric Mayoraz, said he had heard allegations of a massacre at Varjanta "many times" and saw no reason to disbelieve it. "In this dirty war, unfortunately, everything is possible," he said. He added, however, that the Red Cross has no mandate to investigate war crimes allegations and had no firm evidence to prove or disprove that a massacre had taken place at Varjanta.

Indeed, there have been countless atrocity claims by both sides in Bosnia's five-month-old factional war, and rarely has independent verification of such claims been possible. The United Nations does have authority to investigate war crimes charges here, but it was not immediately clear if U.N. human rights officials were aware of the Varjanta allegation. In any case, Serb militia forces who control the purported massacre site have so far denied a Bosnian government request for an independent, third-party inspection of the area.

Bosnian officials here say they believe that if a massacre occurred at Varjanta, it may have been carried out by extremist members of a local Serb police unit without the knowledge of senior Bosnian Serb political or military leaders. Officials here in Travnik are pressing the regional Serb militia commander, Col. Bosko Peulic, for an explanation of what became of the missing men but have had no response so far.

Travnik authorities say that previously they had had frequent and useful communication with Peulic's command—including arrangements for regular prisoner exchanges—and that recently it had handed over the bodies of three Muslims who died in Serb custody last month. But in the case of the Varjanta allegations, Peulic has refused to provide any information at all.

So far as can be determined from the two purported survivors and relatives of the missing men, the Muslim detainees were taken from a Serb-run camp at Trnopolje early

that morning and told they were to be brought here to Travnik as part of a prisoner exchange. First, though, the two prison buses swung through a nearby village, where they fell in behind a convoy of trucks carrying the prisoners' wives and children, who were themselves being expelled from their homes as part of a notorious "ethnic cleansing" campaign by Serb nationalist forces here to expel all non-Serbs from Bosnian territory they control.

It was a frightening journey from the very beginning, as the convoy was repeatedly stopped by armed Serbs along the way. Time and again, Serb policemen or militiamen boarded convoy vehicles and demanded money, jewelry and other valuables from the terrified passengers. People handed over watches, rings, earrings and, in some cases, their life's savings in the form of German currency. More than once, gun-wielding Serbs warned that anyone who failed to produce valuables would be shot.

No one doubted them. Most of the women and children in the convoy were fleeing villages around the north Bosnian city of Prijedor, which has been a focus of Serb attempts to drive local Muslims into exile with threats, intimidation and brute force.

So there was little resistance when the convoy stopped about 15 miles short of its destination—the front lines between Serb and Bosnian government militia forces outside Travnik. Some time earlier, the convoy had been overtaken by a blue police van carrying 10 Serb policemen, whose job it is normally to provide local security in Serb-held territory and to administer detention camps. Now they began winnowing men and boys of military age from the people in the trucks and placing them with the prisoners in the buses.

The man in charge of the police squad was identified by three convoy passengers, including a former neighbor, as Dragan Mrdja, a Bosnian Serb from the village of Tukovci. Under Mrdja's orders, the trucks full of women, small children and older men soon started up and moved out. It was 5 p.m., Aug. 21.

"They didn't even let us speak," said an elderly barber from the town of Kozarec, whose 32-year-old son, a camp inmate, remained behind. The two buses, with armed guards at each door, eventually moved haltingly along the road for about a half-mile, then pulled up a narrow track to the edge of the ravine where the two reputed survivors said the massacre took place.

A 39-year-old Muslim woman who was aboard one of the trucks with her husband and two teenage sons—all of whom were detained at Varjanta by the Serb policemen—fears the worst.

"Tomorrow it will be one month, and we still don't know what happened—if they are shot or burned or what," said the woman, who gave her first name as Suada. "When our trucks drove off, I begged the Serb driver to tell me what will happen to my sons. I said they are only 16 and 19. Will they shoot them? He told me, 'No, they will exchange them, and then they will follow us.'"

The morning after the two buses failed to appear in Travnik, city authorities began making a list of the missing with the help of frantic relatives who had straggled into town the night before. The list now numbers 220.