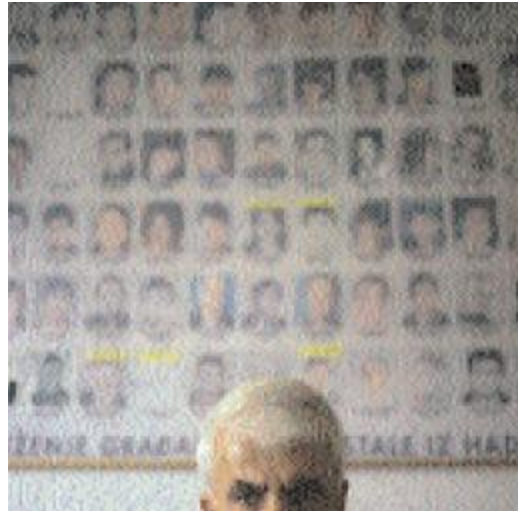


# Bosnia and Herzegovina: All sitting in the same waiting room

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Organization **Association for Rehabilitation of Torture Victims – Centre for Torture Victims (CTV)**  
Location **Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina**



He still wakes up at night, screaming about the river. How the mutilated bodies would drift downstream, how he dragged the bloated corpses up onto the bank, their decomposed limbs sometimes breaking off in his hands. He helped bury 130 people, Muslim civilians killed by Bosnian Serb paramilitaries and tossed into the currents of the River Drina.

Samir\* is 40, but looks older. He sits on the sofa, occasionally rocking and holding his Red Cross registration documents in his hand. At times, he stops and stares out of the window at the rain falling on the trees in the distance. His wife and young son are sitting next to him. She has made us coffee. His son is smiling at me, the stranger who has come to their home to hear his father's story.

When the vicious tide of the Bosnian war swept through eastern Bosnia, Samir, a Muslim, found himself trapped in the town of Zepa. When the town fell to Bosnian Serb forces in the summer of 1995, he, along with many others from the town, decided to cross the River Drina into Serbia. They preferred to take their chances with the regular Serb security forces rather than the Serb paramilitary forces that roamed eastern Bosnia.



“We crossed the Drina at night and were soon captured and taken to a prison camp. For five days we were given nothing to eat or drink. We had to sleep on concrete floors. The Red Cross discovered the camp but the authorities refused to let them in.” Prisoners were taken away for questioning and came back beaten. The men could only go to the outside toilet if they made the sign of the cross. If they failed to do this properly, they were refused.

Samir suddenly stands up in front of me and pulls out a chair. He kneels on it, exposing the soles of his feet. “This is how they used to make me sit. They used police sticks and wooden poles to beat my feet. Afterwards, I could only walk on my knees. Sometimes, even today, I lose control of my feet.”

“Another time, I was taken into the woods blindfolded, my hands tied behind my back. They loaded their guns as if they were going to shoot me. And then they stopped. Nothing happened and we all went back to the camp. It was only a mock execution. In November, in the midst of winter, one prisoner was taken out into the cold with no clothes on and they poured freezing water over him. They used verbal abuse...telling us all our families had been killed but they had spared the young women so they could ‘serve them.’” Samir looks out of the window again. “And there was sexual abuse as well. It happened many times.”

Samir and his fellow prisoners were freed in April 1996, nearly four months after the war had ended. These days he and his wife and three children live in a village a few kilometers from Sarajevo. He is unable to work because of his poor health. He has heart problems, difficulty sleeping, and his memory is bad. He sometimes forgets where he lives. There is minimal help from the State because of limited resources. He says he has no future. He wakes up at night and screams about the river. “I don’t like being alone,” he tells me.

Samir is just one of the thousands of people who have been helped by the Centre for Torture Victims in Sarajevo, an organization whose primary aim is to provide rehabilitation services to victims of torture through a wide range of activities. The Centre was founded in April 1997 with the support of the Denmark-based International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims. In July 2002, CTV was transformed into a locally based NGO. Over the years, financial support has been received from donors, the most important of which include the European Commission and the UNVFVT.

“The scale of the problem is huge,” says the Centre’s Medical Director, Dr. Dubravka Salcic. “We estimate there were around 200,000 people directly tortured, and three to four times that number who were indirectly tortured. By ‘indirectly,’ I mean family members of torture victims...and people forced to witness other people being tortured...who have also suffered the consequences. There were more than 600 detention centres around the country. Torture was commonplace in many of them.

“After the war, NGOs grew up like mushrooms after rain. But unlike them, we wanted to concentrate on the single issue of torture and not get distracted by other issues. This way, we have been able to offer a better service to our clients,” Dr. Salcic tells me in the organization’s offices in the centre of the Bosnian capital. CTV is the base for a small team of dedicated professionals, including psychiatrists, general practitioners, physiotherapists, psychologists, a social worker, a field worker and four administrators.

“We are registered throughout Bosnia and that means Muslim, Serb and Croat areas. We do not distinguish between nationalities. Sometimes, we have Serbs and Muslims, from different sides of the conflict, who sit in the same waiting room ready to see members of our staff. For us, occasions like this are all part of the reconciliation process,” says Dr. Salcic.

Reconciliation is not an easy process in a country that witnessed such ruthless brutality. Much of the brutality was directed towards women.

Rusmira, a Muslim, was 30 years old when her world began to fall apart. Born in the northern Bosnian town of Prijedor she was married with two girls when the shooting and expulsions began. Bosnian Serb paramilitaries quickly took over the town. For the first few weeks, she and her family stayed one step ahead of the gunmen by moving from village to village.



“On 24 July, men with balaclavas came to the house where we were staying. They viciously beat my husband in front of the children and me. His head was bleeding. They tied his hands with wire and took him away. A few days later I saw him again for the last time. It was in the prison camp they had set up. He was shot dead in front of me, along with dozens of others. His blood sprayed onto my clothes.”

Rusmira, now 44, is sitting in front of me. There is an album of family photographs on the table between us. She pauses to light another cigarette. “I was taken to the house outside the camp and kept there. I used to see prisoners being brought to the cornfield behind the house, their hands tied behind their backs. That’s where they were shot. And then, one night, the camp commander came to me. My daughters were in the bedroom sleeping. He used a knife to strip me. I fought back. He stabbed me and then raped me. It was just the first time. It happened this way, night after night, week after week. I told myself I would survive. He said he wanted me to survive because it would be more painful for me than dying. He was my former headmaster.”

Rusmira, who has received advice and assistance from CTV, was eventually freed as part of a prisoner exchange and now lives in Western Europe. She has provided evidence at the ICTY, against those who carried out such crimes.

“When the Centre for Torture Victims first began, we had to be very proactive in encouraging people to contact us. To put it bluntly, many people simply didn’t realize they had been tortured and that they might need help. Our field work was absolutely vital,” says Dr. Cakovic, 30, who has worked as a general practitioner at the Centre for the past four years.

“But gradually, through word of mouth, through the media and through our own campaigning, more and more people became aware of our existence and the services we could offer. And then the floodgates opened. It came to the point where we could barely cope.”

The Centre currently organizes mobile teams that travel to different parts of the country. A team will travel to an area and spend several days offering as much professional advice as possible. They have been particularly active in Mostar and the town of Brcko in north-east Bosnia. “It’s important to prepare the ground before we go into a community, so members of the team will usually phone ahead and speak to our potential clients, explaining our work and identifying their needs,” says Dr. Cakovic. Depending on those needs, a team may include a general practitioner, psychiatrist, social worker and psychologist. “This multidisciplinary approach is vital. Individuals and families have been affected by their experiences in so many ways – from the need for housing, to claiming a pension to receiving medications. Rehabilitation is central to what we’re trying to do.”

Milorad enters the room slowly, sits down at the kitchen table and begins to smoke. Through the course of his story, he smokes continuously, extracting and lighting his cigarettes with ease, despite having the use of only one arm. By profession, Milorad was a teacher for children with special needs. A Serb from Orasje in northern Bosnia, his life was irrevocably changed when war erupted in the spring of 1992. Many Serbs decided to withdraw to the Serb-held town of Brcko. Milorad decided to stay in his hometown.

“It was my town, where I belonged. Why should I leave?” he asks. “I was arrested by Croatian forces on 11 June. We were taken to a local school. After the questioning, Croats and Muslims were allowed to leave but all the Serbs were kept behind. We were eventually taken to a prison camp. Because I was married to a Croat, the guards were not particularly bad to me. But other Serbs were regularly beaten. I witnessed some Serbs who were so thirsty – they’d been refused water – they were forced to drink their own urine. At least one of them died.

“Every day we were taken out to dig trenches on the front line, frequently under fire from the Serb positions. Our guards would deliberately try to provoke us, trying to find an excuse to beat us. One day in September 1992, I made the mistake of talking back to

one of the guards. Other prisoners warned me I shouldn't have done so and that I should be careful. A couple of days later, I was chopping wood close to the front line. I heard a shot and, the next thing I knew, my hand was hanging off. I fell into a trench and then I saw the guard who had provoked me earlier. The shot could not have come from the other side of the front line because of the angle. The guard had taken his revenge on me. In all, I spent seven months in the camps. I lost about a third of my body weight during that time."

And then there is the story of Emir. He was working at a petrol station in the south-eastern town of Visegrad when war broke out. "We hid in the woods and watched as our village was burned to the ground by Serb paramilitaries. We could hear the gunfire as people were shot." Along with dozens of others hiding in the woods, he was eventually persuaded to leave the forests and was promised transport out of Bosnia.

"There were 50 of us on a bus. We had originally been told we would be going to Macedonia but then the plan changed and we were told we were to be exchanged for Serb prisoners. But then the beatings started and I gradually began to fear that we were not going to be exchanged at all. After hours on the bus we were driven up a small hill and then let off the bus. We were marched off in a column, two by two. I was at the end. Our hands were tied behind our backs with wire. There was still a glimmer of hope that we were being exchanged – we were not far from the front line.

"But then the first two were called forward. They were standing close to a bush, about 20 metres away from me. They were shot at point-blank range. Their bodies tumbled backwards into, what I later discovered, was a cave, hidden by the bush. The rest of us froze. There was no shouting, no panic, no crying, just total paralysis. They had executed 10 of us, most of them friends and relatives of mine. The Serb commander ordered the two guards at the back of the line to go forward and take part in the murders. It was then that I felt this tug on my shoulder. I turned. There was no one there. They continued to kill. I said to myself, 'this is it, this is it.' I turned and began to run, my hands still tied. I made it six or seven metres before I felt the warmth of the bullets passing me. After 30 metres, I fell into some leaves and glanced back. I couldn't see anyone following. I kept on running."

It was another four hours before Emir eventually found sanctuary in a Muslim village. After recovering from his injuries, he made his way to Bosnian-held territory. Six years later, he brought investigators from the ICTY to the scene of the killings. On entering the cave, they found 49 bodies. All those he had stood in line with had been shot and thrown into the cave. He was the only survivor, the only witness.

To assist victims of torture like Emir, CTV has adopted a holistic approach. As part of their efforts to provide practical and professional help to thousands of victims of torture, the staff members dispense medications, listen to the stories of victims and try to help them deal with their recurring nightmares.

In addition to dealing with individual cases, CTV is firmly committed to addressing some of the broader issues related to torture. By carefully monitoring and recording each case, the Centre has developed a valuable body of knowledge about methods of torture, its impact and the long-term consequences for victims and their families. The Centre plays a crucial role in preparing clients for the trauma of giving evidence at the ICTY in The Hague. Staff members regularly participate in international conferences on torture.

Another key aspect of the Centre's work is in the area of prevention. The Centre has run more than 60 seminars, attended by more than 1,500 Bosnian police officers. Issues covered include what acts constitute torture, the potential consequences for perpetrators and victims, and international agreements ratified by Bosnia and Herzegovina. Officers have also researched case studies so they are able to recognize and respond to cases of torture.

Dr. Cakovic says the real need is for long-term planning. "It is very difficult to treat people with such profound mental and physical wounds without the security of long-term funding. For example, someone may need medication for the rest of their life but we may only be able to provide it for 12 months. It's impossible to structure treatment or development. Much of our time is spent juggling the needs of our clients with the need to apply for funding – which is not an ideal state of affairs."

"Since 1997, we've treated about 2,000 direct torture victims and about 6,000 indirect torture victims," says Dr. Salcic. "We're very proud to have helped so many people. The problem is that there are so many more out there. The wounds are deep and it is not only the victims of torture we have to think about, but also the families of the victims, especially the children. The work we are doing at the Centre is needed...now and in the years to come."