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A message for Iraq from the graves of Bosnia

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At first I did not see the skeletons. Bones that have spent years in the ground acquire the colour of the mud in which they have lain. Adjusting my eyes, the trench at my feet revealed 10 skulls at least. One of them was perforated by a neat hole where the victim had been shot above the ear. Another skull was wrapped around with a blindfold, now also dyed the colour of mud. A third was open-mouthed, as though still in pain.

That was the scene last week when I visited the excavation of a mass grave containing the mortal remains of maybe 60 out of the 8,000 people who were murdered at Srebrenica in Bosnia a decade ago. This gruesome find near the village of Snagovo is known as a secondary site. In 1995, as the Dayton peace agreement loomed, the perpetrators of mass murder tried to foil investigation of their crimes. Using heavy earth-moving equipment they scooped up bodies, or parts of them at least, and transferred them to more remote places. But as Shakespeare put it: "Truth will come to light; murder cannot be hid long."

I am a member of the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP). It oversees exhumations in order to identify the dead. To leave grieving families ignorant of the fate of their loved ones violates their human rights. Providing them with a body to bury brings (in the jargon) "closure". Reconciliation between the former warring factions may stand a better chance if most victims have been allowed the dignity of a funeral.

The commission matches the DNA extracted from victims' bones with blood samples given by relatives of the 40,000 people who were missing at the end of the war. Blood samples are needed from about 100,000 family members, some of whom now live as far away as Australia. There has never been a programme on this scale. With growing experience the technicians have become highly successful at extracting the tiny traces of DNA from bone samples. This year alone 4,000 victims will be given a name. Corpses accounting for nearly half of those murdered at Srebrenica have now been identified.

This harrowing work flushes out the truth. It is now difficult for Bosnian Serbs to deny the massacres. Claims that the dead were soldiers killed in battle are disproved when the skeletons are found in civilian clothes, or with wire wrapped around their wrists. Every exhumation site is a crime scene and provides evidence that could be presented to the international tribunal in the Hague or in a domestic court.

As we struggle to impose order on Iraq, it is worth noting what progress Bosnia has made in 10 years. There, Nato forces never faced an insurrection. Violence ceased the day the international community intervened. But even now a European Union military force of about 6,000 (including 700 British) is required to maintain peace.

Reconciliation between the factions has made little progress. Indeed, the populations have moved apart. Serbs used to make up nearly half the population of Sarajevo. Today the city is about 90% Muslim. Refugees are reluctant to return to villages where they would be in a minority, or where those who perpetrated war crimes are still at liberty.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is not a successful state. It is made up of two entities: its Serbian republic and a federation of Muslims and Croats. The state has three presidents (one from each religious/national group) and the entities have two more. It is difficult to get co-operation on anything at state level. An unusual example will be the single organisation which will inherit the work of identifying the bodies in all Bosnia-Herzegovina, the so-called Missing Persons Institute. It might just turn out to be a model for other state organisations. But even it has to have three equal-ranking directors.

Throughout the public service, appointments have to be made in threesomes. It is discouraging for people of talent because jobs are not awarded on merit. In any case the economy is weak. About a quarter of the population is unemployed. Nearly half live close to or below the official poverty line of €1,100 (£750) of income per year.

While people enjoy the benefits of peace, they have not renounced war with an emphatic "never again". There are many thousands of Kalashnikovs and hand grenades at large. Police forces owe allegiance to their religious/national group, not to the state. If trouble reignited they could be part of the problem rather than the solution.

Lord Ashdown, the former Liberal Democrat leader, is the international community's high representative in Bosnia, a sort of colonial governor. He exudes optimism. As he nears the end of his term perhaps he has a vested interest in perceiving progress.

Bosnia is being lured towards improvement by the prospect of EU membership. Negotiations will be odd, since no Bosnian politician seems to believe in the state that is seeking entry. None can get beyond being a Muslim, Serb or Croat. If the international community offers the Kosovo Albanians de facto independence, the Bosnian Serbs will demand the same. Bosnian Croats still hanker to go their own way, too.

Sipping coffee last week in a pleasant open-air cafe in Sarajevo, I could hardly compare the place with terror-torn Baghdad. But Bosnia does indicate that three religious/national groups will not start working together just because foreigners tell them to. Perhaps the concept of "Iraq" commands as little allegiance among Sunnis, Shi'ites and Kurds as "Bosnia-Herzegovina" does among Muslims, Serbs and Croats.

In Iraq, too, they are now digging up bodies, Saddam Hussein's victims. There will be many more bodies there than in Bosnia. It will be a long and painful process. But Iraqi families should be allowed to achieve closure and culprits must pay the penalty for their depravity. Iraqis have human rights, too (although you would not think so, given the allies' refusal to count those who have died since the fall of Baghdad).

Being involved with human rights in Bosnia has made me think about how countries should deal with their past. Some would argue that exhumations keep people focused on their unhappy history and perpetuate divisions. I do not agree, at least not in the medium term. Mothers unable to mourn sons are not going to "move on" anyway. Nor do they forgive.

Many countries, including South Africa and Chile, have chosen to set up truth commissions. Such institutions overcome the problem of denial. At the end of the process an official report details what atrocities occurred. But often that can be achieved only by granting witnesses immunity from prosecution. So victims may regard the arrangement as favouring the perpetrators.

In the case of the former Yugoslavia the international community took a different route. Slobodan Milosevic, the former Serbian president, is on trial in the Hague. Other charges are likely to follow, although it is disappointing (to put it mildly) that Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic are still at large, possibly in Bosnian territory patrolled by EU forces.

However, the exhumations cannot go on for ever. Although it may mean denial of justice to some, one day a line should be drawn. There comes a point where raking over the past changes from being a prerequisite for reconciliation to being a tool for fomenting further strife.

Spain moved almost overnight from dictatorship to democracy. There was no truth commission and no trials. It helped that most of the regime's crimes had been committed early in Franco's career, at least 30 years before the dictator died. The country seemed to agree that by then national amnesia was best.

Now exhumations occur in Spain as well. They are digging up bodies that have lain in the earth since 1936. Of course there are sons and daughters alive today who can claim the remains of their parents and Amnesty International asserts their right to demand exhumations. But it seems that some of the motivation is political. In a country that is now more openly polarised than before, reviving the memory of atrocities can be used as a stick to beat the political right. It makes political divisions more bitter.

The gaping-mouthed skull that I saw last week in Bosnia seemed to call for justice. But the Spanish should recall that time is an even greater healer than justice. Time must also be allowed to do its work.

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