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Serbia considers apology for killings

BELGRADE

Debate about Srebrenica, and death of Muslims, is taken on by lawmakers

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Lawmakers in Serbia opened a heated debate Tuesday over whether to condemn the killing of more than 7,000 Muslims in Srebrenica during the Bosnian wars, in what was the worst massacre in Europe since World War II.

In July 1995, Serb forces overran Srebrenica, which had been declared a U.N. safe zone for the Muslim civilians in the Bosnian enclave. The Dutch U.N. peacekeeping force protecting the enclave was undermanned and outgunned and did not intervene.

The pro-Western government of Serbia has put forward a declaration that offers sympathy and an apology to the victims, saying it would promote reconciliation in the region and help Serbian efforts to become a member of the European Union.

"Let us close the door of the tragic past and open the door to the future," said Nada Kolundzija of the governing coalition. "We need to say that Serbia does not stand behind those who committed those crimes."

Officials from the European Union have told Belgrade leaders that they need to clearly distance themselves from the wartime policies of the late president Slobodan Milosevic if they want to move closer to E.U. membership. The E.U. also insists that Serbia arrest a former Bosnian Serbian Army commander, Ratko Mladic, who was charged with genocide by a U.N. court for orchestrating the Srebrenica massacre.

The declaration by the Parliament about Srebrenica calls for the arrest of Mr. Mladic and urges the authorities to do all they can to find him. But it stops short of calling the massacre in Srebrenica genocide.

The declaration met strong opposition from the nationalists, who argued that it would turn the country into a pariah.

"By this act, you want to turn Serbia into an eternal villain," declared Slobodan Aligrudic, an opposition deputy.

Some Muslim religious and political

leaders and pro-Western groups also were unhappy with the declaration and demanded that it included the word "genocide."

In the Hague on Tuesday, relatives of Bosnian Muslims killed in the massacre lost another round in their attempt to sue the United Nations for responsibility.

The Hague Appeals Court upheld a 2008 lower court ruling affirming U.N. immunity from prosecution enshrined in the international conventions that established the world body and said the legal protection was an essential foundation of its peacekeeping operations around the world.

Lawyers for the family members, known as the Mothers of Srebrenica, vowed to take the case to the Dutch Supreme Court and the European Court of Justice if necessary.

Lawyers for the Mothers of Srebrenica said the ruling undermines their "fundamental human rights" of access to "effective legal remedies."

In a related development, a retired American general has apologized for a remark he made to the U.S. Senate last

The authorities say an apology would promote reconciliation. Opponents say it would make Serbia an "eternal villain."

week suggesting that gay Dutch soldiers were partly to blame for the Srebrenica massacre, according to the Dutch department of defense.

The comment by retired Gen. John Sheehan during testimony opposing a proposal to allow gays to serve openly in the U.S. military caused an uproar in the Netherlands, where discrimination against gays is outlawed, including in the military.

The Defense Ministry released an e-mail message on Tuesday from Gen. Sheehan, a former NATO commander who retired from the military in 1997, that was sent to retired Dutch Gen. Henk van den Breemen saying he was sorry for his statements to the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 18.

In the message, General Sheehan says the 1995 murder of some 8,000 Muslim men in Bosnia's Srebrenica enclave "was in no way the fault of individual soldiers."