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Pool photo by Lewis Whyld

Tony Blair, foreground left, greeting Muslim leaders Monday at a breakfast meeting at No. 10 Downing Street. He later addressed a government-organized conference on Islam.

UN and Netherlands sued over Srebrenica killings

The Associated Press

THE HAGUE: Survivors of the worst massacre in Europe since World War II filed a lawsuit Monday against the United Nations and the Dutch government, saying they failed to protect civilians in Srebrenica when Bosnian Serb forces overran the town in 1995 and killed up to 8,000 men and boys.

The lawsuit came on the day a former Bosnian Serb general, Zdravko Tolimir, one of the main suspects in the Srebrenica killings, was arraigned before the UN war crimes tribunal but declined to enter a plea.

"The goal is not financial for the mothers and other survivors: it's about satisfaction," said Marco Gerritsen, a lawyer who will represent 6,000 family members of victims in the class-action lawsuit.

"Unfortunately the UN and the Dutch state are not willing to take their responsibility — they do not even want to talk about it," he said.

In evidence-gathering civil hearings in 2005, a lawyer for the Dutch govern-

ment argued that compensation claims should be directed at the perpetrators of the massacre: the Bosnian Serb political leader Radovan Karadzic and troops under the authority of General Ratko Mladic. Both men are still at large.

About 200 survivors from the group known as the Mothers of Srebrenica traveled from Bosnia to accompany lawyers as they delivered the civil summons Monday at the Dutch Supreme Court, where claims against the state must be filed.

The lawsuit's chances of success are uncertain, and the degree of culpability of the UN and its Dutch soldiers in the massacre is fiercely debated.

During the 1992-95 Bosnian war, the UN declared Srebrenica — which had been besieged by Serb forces — a protected safe area for civilians.

But about 450 Dutch soldiers on peacekeeping duty stood by as thousands of Bosnian Serb forces stormed the region in July 1995. In a chaotic and menacing situation, Dutch soldiers even assisted in separating the women from

the men, who were taken away in buses by the Serb forces and murdered, their bodies buried in mass graves.

An independent study by the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation cleared the Dutch troops of blame, noting that they had been outnumbered, lightly armed, undersupplied, and under instructions to fire only in self-defense.

But the institute's 2002 report assigned partial blame to the Dutch government for setting the troops up to fail, prompting the cabinet of Prime Minister Wim Kok to resign.

Kofi Annan, who was responsible for UN peacekeeping operations at the time, has acknowledged "errors of judgment" regarding Srebrenica.

The Dutch government has accepted "political responsibility" for the mission's failure and gives about \$20 million in aid to Bosnia annually, of which a third is reserved for projects related to rebuilding Srebrenica.

Gerritsen said that it was not enough for the Dutch to compensate the Bosnian government, that it must also com-

pensate the victims personally. He said the initial filing requested \$34,000 in compensation for 10 mothers of victims.

Other lawyers representing survivors in the past have said \$2.7 billion in compensation would be the starting point for negotiations in a settlement.

The International Court of Justice this year dismissed a claim filed by Bosnia against Serbia seeking compensation for the killings at Srebrenica; Bosnian Serbs were primarily behind the massacre and links with neighboring Serbia were too tenuous, the court found.

Tolimir's appearance before judges at the Yugoslav war crimes tribunal was his first since he was arrested at the Bosnian border with Serbia last week after two years on the run.

One of Mladic's top aides, he is charged with genocide, conspiracy to commit genocide, extermination, murder, persecution, forcible transfer and deportation, as well as murder in connection with the Srebrenica massacre.

times gone by, of torture — to force conversion to Christianity — represents the true teaching of Christ," he said.

Muslim leaders from Egypt, Indonesia, Bosnia, Western Europe and the United States joined a carefully selected group of British Muslims at Lancaster House in London for a two-day program that was organized by the government in conjunction with Cambridge University.

The guest list had been a subject of negotiations for the past several weeks, with some British Muslims complaining that the conference was shaped to lend support for Blair's policies on Iraq and Afghanistan, and to affirm government support for some British Muslim groups over others.

In general, the participants appeared to be chosen on the basis that they would provide a bulwark against what the government considers extremist views. Blair officials have often spoken of "inoculating" mainstream British Muslims from the dangers of extremist thought.

"It's a colonial style of conference where the government has tried to divide the Muslim leadership and create a new one," said Nazir Ahmed, a member of the Labour Party who became the first Muslim peer in the House of Lords in 1998.

Ahmed, who was not invited to attend, said the government had excluded people who disagreed with Blair's policies on terrorism, Afghanistan and Iraq. "They've included people who don't have an opinion or who have remained silent," he said.