Good morning ladies, gentlemen, and distinguished guests:

My name is Adisada Dudic, and I am honored to be here on the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica Genocide. I thank Ambassador Colakovic and the Bosnia and Herzegovina Mission to the United Nations for organizing this commemoration.  I convey my sincere gratitude to all countries, notably the United States, that support and recognize the genocide that happened in Srebrenica.

Why do we need to remember Srebrenica and the systematic murder of 8,372 men and young boys that took place in July of 1995?

For those of us who survived one way or another, we remember simply because we cannot forget.  Our destiny, for better or worse, is to give a voice to those tens of thousands who have been silenced forever or who are still too traumatized to speak.  Each person had a name, a family, a future.

My family is from a small village Osmace, just outside of Srebrenica.  I am five when the war begins.  It is April 15, 1992.  My father loads my mother, sisters, and me onto trucks with other women and children from the village, hoping to get us as far away as possible, as soon as possible.  I am confused.  Scared.  My father finds a few encouraging words that everything will calm down in a few weeks and we will come back.  He tries his best to hide the tears in his eyes as he says goodbye.  He promises that he will protect us, and that we will be reunited very soon.  It is years before I realize just how long “soon” can be, and that I will never see many members of my family again.

My mom was nine months pregnant with our youngest sister when we left Osmace.  We travelled for nine days, mostly at night, terrified of being discovered, killed, or sent back.  We reached Ljubljana, in Slovenia, on April 23, and the ambulance rushed my mom to a hospital.  She delivered my baby sister Zumreta the next day.  We spent the next three years moving from one refugee camp to another.  My childhood memories are those of fear, bloodshed, and fire.  I spent every day waiting for my dad to appear.  Every man that passed through the refugee camp reminded me that my dad was not there.  I remember my little sister intently watching the cars on the streets outside the refugee camp – every now and then, a yellow Golf would pass by, and she’d perk up, thinking dad is coming home from work, as he did so many times before.   In one fit of desperation, I remember asking my mom quite poignantly “why does everyone have a dad and I don’t?”  It is only now, when I look back at this time as an adult, that I understand how difficult such questions must have been for her.  She had to raise four girls, all under the age of seven, by herself in a strange land, confined to the walls of the refugee settlements, while being in complete darkness about the fate of those who stayed behind.

My childhood was stolen from me.  The hurtful reality I try to suppress comes back ever so uninvited.  It reminds me that my home country is destroyed, my family members have been killed, wounded, tortured, dumped in mass graves, missing, or all of the above.  It reminds me that millions of Bosnian refugees are scattered over the world, that thousands of Bosnian men and boys were tortured in concentration camps and buried in mass graves, that thousands of Bosnian women and girls were raped and ravaged.  The ordeals of those slaughtered by the Serb forces out to destroy every person that self-identified as a Bosnian Muslim follow me every day.  It infuriates me to know that a majority of those responsible for the genocide are now living happy, uninterrupted lives.

I went back to Srebrenica in 2008, and my father and I participated in the annual Peace March, which honors the victims of the genocide as it tracks the paths of those who took to the woods in the hopes of reaching safety elsewhere.  Most of them were either shot from nearby hills or captured and taken to nearby fields and warehouses where they were tortured, executed, and buried in mass graves.  As we walked through the woods, we passed by the numerous sites of newly discovered mass graves containing the bones of hundreds of individuals, from young children to the elderly.  This time, I was experiencing everything through the eyes of an adult, having experienced both the good and evil of this world, fortunate to have gotten a “western” education, and I still could not make sense of how this could have happened.  I doubt I ever will.  The senseless killing of civilians is simply too egregious to comprehend.  My 55-year-old grandmother was killed outside of our house in Osmace by a grenade launched from the hills of Serbia across the Drina River.  Today in Bosnia, we are still digging up the remains of innocent victims, with the intent of returning them to their loved ones so that they can be properly buried. My mom is still waiting to bury her brother.  The last thing we know is that he tried to escape Srebrenica through the woods in July of 1995, but we have yet to get the news that his remains have been identified.  My maternal grandmother died two years ago, having waited eighteen years to bury him.  A part of me believes she died of a broken heart as much as of health reasons.  There is great angst in not knowing where the bones of your loved ones are, and in the desire to give them a proper burial, visit their graves, and say a prayer for their souls.

We must collectively recognize the failures in Srebrenica, speak candidly of the lessons learned, and pledge our commitment to the innocent victims.  The Srebrenica Genocide happened while the international community watched, with the hesitations, half-measures, and unwise compromises as official policy.  In Resolution 819, the UN formally recognized the dangers of the Serb genocidal plot.  In 1993, Srebrenica was declared a safe area.  It was to be protected by the UN peacekeeping forces and be free from any armed and hostile attack.  This Resolution further affirmed that acquisition of territory through ethnic cleansing is unlawful and unacceptable.

Although the UN successfully demilitarized Srebrenica, it failed to protect the civilian population.  This left them worse off and defenseless.  As is widely documented today, the UN officials were unwilling to heed requests for support from their own forces stationed within the enclave, thus allowing the Serb forces to easily overrun it and, without interference from the UN troops there, carry out systematic, mass executions of thousands of civilian men and boys and to terrorize, rape, beat, execute, rob, and otherwise abuse civilians being deported from the area.

In the aftermath, the international community continued to compound this failure with many others in the same vain as the half-measures that led to the genocide.  Serb aggressors were afforded equal footing at the negotiating table with their victims and were granted authority over areas they cleansed of the Muslim population.  The peace accords legitimized the spoils of genocide for the Serbs.

As we speak, Serbs and their sympathizers are attempting to rewrite the history of this genocide. Their efforts include genocide denial, equalization of blame, and constant calls for secession of ethnically cleansed areas.  Thanks primarily to the UN, however, efforts to identify and prosecute war criminals have provided exceptionally detailed accounts that refute these claims.  We are eternally grateful that after years of testimony and evidence, both the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia found that the grave breaches of international law in Srebrenica by the Serb military forces constituted genocide.  Speaking on the subject of Srebrenica as anything other than genocide not only undermines and discredits the international justice system, but it disregards the weight and impact of these killings, diminishes the search for genocide victims, and compounds the struggle to identify the bodies found in mass graves. Calling what happened in Srebrenica in 1995 by any name other than genocide, be it massacre, tragedy, catastrophe, or whatever else, not only thwarts the possibility of reconciliation and bolsters those denying the genocide and leading the secession efforts, but it trivializes the pain and suffering of genocide victims, re-victimizes the survivors, and minimizes the enormity of the crime.  Denial does not make the facts go away.  It does not change the past, and it certainly does not erase memory.  Dangers of silence and consequences of hate and indifference allowed genocide to happen in Srebrenica.

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I envision that the central purpose of the UN is to safeguard our humanity, individually and collectively, above and beyond our sovereign governments.  We must learn from the failures in Srebrenica and their lasting consequences.  When faced with brazen disregard for human life, it is not enough to make official statements of condemnation.  We must follow these with action, instead of dangerously false and inadequate promises of protection or appeasement.

Thank you.