

## Cry for the truth, justice and place of remembrance

### Confronting

A woman reporter from Danas newspaper with Women in Black at the protest in Foca on the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict

During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1996 Foca became a synonym for mass and systematic raping of women.

Reported by: Jelena Dikovic

In that sexual slavery women of all ages were being abused, from 11 year-old girls to some people's grandmothers.

More than 26 years have passed since April 1992 when Foca fell and the monstrous crimes by Serbian forces against the non-Serbian population began. On June the 19th this year for the first time after so many years the victims, together with representatives of NGOs from Serbia and Bosnia who support them in their fight for the truth, justice and place of remembrance, came to Foca to commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict. This was a historical event.

"We remember women raped in war", "Responsibility", "Solidarity", "We remember the place of crime" were only some of the messages left at the places of crimes by the protesters who were asking from the government amongst other things to build a memorial for the victims, most of all for women. The action was organized by Women in Black from Belgrade with the help and support of Women Autonomous Center from Belgrade, Citizen Association from Gorazde, Association of Women Seka also from Gorazde, Association of War Victims Foca 92-95 and Foundation Cure from Sarajevo, as well as Network of Women in Black from Leskovac, Kraljevo, Pljevlje and Prijepolje.

For those victims that unfortunately didn't survive rape and violence but also for those who lost their dearest and those who are still searching for their body remains the action wearing all black and in silence on this rainy Tuesday in Foca showed most of all solidarity, empathy and respect for women victims of gruesome crimes.

Escorted by the police, the protest started in front of the Partizan Sports Hall. It was a place that in 1992 served as a detention center for women (there were at least 72 hostages), children and elders. In that building, that is being under renovation at the moment, the most monstrous crimes were being committed. The entrance is covered with garbage as a symbol of how victims were being treated then and how memory of them is being treated today. And as the participants were laying down flowers and leaving messages in front of the entrance door, Sanela Altoka, a kid from Foca who was only 12 and half years old when the crimes started, told the media how her parents and numerous relatives have been murdered and how she herself had been imprisoned with her sister only 50 meters from Partizan Hall. She had been constantly hearing screams coming from the Sports Hall.

- I came to Foca for my own sake as well as my mother's whom I still didn't find. She was killed when she was 38 years old, my father was 40. They were killed only because they had a different name and lastname. Foca is the city of my childhood and my suffering but as long as I live I will be coming back here, said Altoka and pointed out that a memorial in Foca is necessary because all victims deserve it, especially women.

The protest continued by foot towards the bridge on Drina River where a big number of victims were being murdered and thrown into the river. The participants first stopped at the main square. The passengers were surprised by watching what was going on. At first some older men put in a good word for the action but when they realized that it was about Bosniak victims they started saying that the past should be forgotten... One middle-aged man yelled out: "How many Serbs have you killed" and started following the crowd. Luckily the police stopped him.

Stasa Zajovic from Women in Black said to the media that a woman's body was always a part of military strategy, hatred and humiliation.

- This city reached frightening dimensions of crime against women. Most of the crimes remained unpunished and traumas are still not being surpassed. The community of Foca has to gather strength and hear the request of the surviving victims for places of crimes to get marked. We know that all women were victims but we also know that the aggression and uncountable crimes on the territory of Bosnia were committed by Serbian armed forces. Unfortunately, 26 years later and the denial and minimization of the crimes goes on, Zajovic said.

The crowd then stopped in front of the Criminal Correction Home Foca, one of the biggest prisons in Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia which during war served as the main prison object for men. The current prisoners in that dilapidating building surrounded with barbed wire were peeking behind dirty windows. On the bridge in front of the Home Women in Black held a performance called "Look yourself in the mirror" and then the participants threw flowers into Drina.

Halida Konjo Uzunovic, the president of the Association of War Victims Foca 92-95, survived the crimes in Foca. Here she lost two of her brothers and her husband.

- My brothers bodies were exhumed while my husband is still in the depths of Drina River, she said and added that 31 percent of women were killed on the territory of Foca.

Everyone then headed towards the Karaman House in Miljevina, which was a camp for raping women. The soldiers called it a brothel. In the camp there were women and girls imprisoned some being only 12 years old. It is around 15 minutes away from Foca by car. The house is still there. Untouched. The gate of the frontyard of the house of terror and horror was locked. It seems like someone lives here or that someone is using it as a vacation house. Even though it was locked, wooden flowers were being left on the gate as a memory and warning that crimes are not forgotten.

#### Request for building a memorial

One of the very important events that happened before the protest was the meeting of Women in Black and the Association of War Victims Foca 92-95 with Izet Spahic, the president of the Municipality Parliament Foca and the Vice President of the Municipality Zoran Elez. Spahic pointed out that every normal human being would condemn the crimes, especially those against women, while Elez said that abusement of women was committed on all sides and that the perpetrators should be punished. The women guests from Sarajevo, Belgrade and Gorazde asked for the places of crimes to be marked in a dignified manner, that is the memorials for Bosniak victims to be built, to which Elez responded that no one is against the marking but then asked them if that means that "the other side doesn't have weight in it". Both of them explained that other instances of the authorities decide upon it but they were asked to file a request for building a memorial.