

Srebrenica: A Dutch national trauma

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Abstract

The Srebrenica genocide of 1995 and the failure of Dutch peacekeeping troops to protect the enclave have brought about a lingering, painful national debate in the Netherlands. Almost two decades after the fall of Srebrenica, the issue remains sensitive in Dutch society. From the extensive amount of Dutch writing, analyses and investigations into what happened in Srebrenica one can conclude that the Dutch public felt the obligation to approach the issue as a party that had been directly involved in the events. Academics, journalists and artists, as well as involved army personnel and members of the Dutch government, engaged in discussing responsibility and culpability, and thoroughly examined what could have been done differently. This debate resulted in a painful self-investigation of Dutch society and politics. A feeling of guilt was widespread, and the capability of Dutch politicians and army has been seriously questioned. All of the activities related to Srebrenica - ranging from writing to composing music, and from public demonstrations to donating money to survivors – are attempts to deal with a national trauma. Moreover, the Dutch experience in Srebrenica has led the United Nations to seriously rethink its approach in subsequent peacekeeping missions, especially with regard to the application of the concept of safe areas in conflict zones.

Introduction

In July 1995, genocide took place in the Bosnian enclave of Srebrenica during which more than 8.000 Bosnian Muslim men were killed by Serbian paramilitary forces. At that moment, about 700 Dutch soldiers were present in the area as part of a United Nations (U.N.) peacekeeping mission with the task to protect Srebrenica

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and its Muslim residents from Serbian violence. The Dutch battalion proved unable to prevent the killings and became a witness of what is said to be the biggest war crime committed in Europe since the Second World War.

The Srebrenica affair has brought about a lingering, painful national debate, in which the capability of Dutch politicians and army has been seriously questioned. A set of controversies have characterized the aftermath of Srebrenica; for instance the government's attempts to conceal what really happened, as well as stories about inappropriate behaviour of Dutch soldiers. The more such stories were revealed, the more the debate turned into a painful self-investigation of Dutch society and politics. A series of official investigations was ordered in an attempt to reconstruct in detail what happened in Srebrenica and in government headquarters in The Hague during July 1995. The issue dominated the political atmosphere for a long time; years later in 2002, a cabinet resigned over the Srebrenica-issue. Almost twenty years after, survivors have sued Dutch commanders, the Dutch state and the U.N. over the issue.

While observers around the world have commented on the topic and the Dutch performance in Srebrenica, this paper will focus on the domestic debate that took place in the Netherlands and is an attempt to reconstruct this debate. The aim is to draw a conclusion about how the Dutch relate to the Srebrenica-genocide as a party that was indirectly involved in the events. Moreover, it will be examined how the Dutch cope with the Srebrenica-affair as a national trauma. This will be done by analysing books and artwork that the Dutch published after 1995 and that deal with the issue. Finally, the paper will discuss the impact of Srebrenica on the practice of international peacekeeping missions in general.

The Dutch failure in Bosnia

The war in Bosnia started as a result of instability in the wider region of the former Yugoslavia. The disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992 aggravated ethnic conflict in the region, which led to a war between Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia. After Bosnia declared independence in 1992, the Bosnian War broke out as a consequence of nationalist tensions and the involvement of neighbouring countries such as Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro. A U.N. peacekeeping force had already been deployed in regions of the former Yugoslavia in February 1992. In 1993, the situation escalated as the Bosnian-Serb paramilitary forces killed a great number of civilians in towns and villages in eastern Bosnia, forced inhabitants to flee their homes, and effectively disrupted the transfer of humanitarian aid. As a result, the Dutch government decided to contribute troops to the U.N. peacekeeping mission called UNPROFOR: The United Nations Protection Force. Eventually, the 700 troops that formed the battalion 'Dutchbat' were sent to the eastern Bosnian enclave of Srebrenica, where thousands of Muslims had sought refuge as a result of fighting and expulsion. This area had been declared a *safe area* by the United Nations in April 1993. The primary task of the Dutchbat soldiers was to protect the enclave and the Bosnians Muslims therein, as the area was surrounded and threatened by the approaching Bosnian-Serb army led by General Ratko Mladić.

According to Dutch Minister of Defence at the time, Relus ter Beek, and his successor Joris Voorhoeve, Dutchbat's mission was mainly humanitarian, which explains why the soldiers were not heavily armed. The soldiers proved to be

inadequately equipped at the moment the Bosnian Serbs eventually attacked the enclave on 11 July 1995. Allegedly, a restricted U.N. mandate as well as the lack of air enforcement prevented the troops from effectively protecting civilians, and limited the options for intervention as the Bosnian-Serb army took over the enclave. Part of the Muslim refugees present in the enclave decided to flee on foot to the nearby Muslim city of Tuzla. The majority however, stayed in the enclave seeking the protection of the U.N. blue helmets. When Mladić's soldiers began evacuating the enclave as part of a policy of ethnic cleansing, they prevented Dutchbat from accompanying the refugees and from supervising over their transportation. The Serbian soldiers separated men and women and set out to deport the women from the enclave, after which some of them were tortured, abused or killed. In the meantime, the Muslim men were detained and systematically tortured and killed by the Bosnian Serbs. Groups of men that fled to the surrounding forest in an attempt to escape the killings were usually awaited by Serbian soldiers and killed too. Dutchbat left the enclave on 21 July 1995. A couple of days later, the news reached the world that mass killings had taken place in Srebrenica and that approximately 8.000 Bosnian men had lost their lives.

After the return of the Dutch soldiers to the Netherlands, a feeling of defeat and failure characterized the national mood. On July 12, 1995, the day after the fall of Srebrenica, the headlines of the Dutch newspapers illustrated this: "Failure in the Balkan" (*Algemeen Dagblad*), "Impotence" (*De Telegraaf*) and "Too little too late" (*De Volkskrant*).² Despite a general disappointment with the performance of Dutchbat, a

² Van der Meulen, J.S. "Stemmingen aan het thuisfront – de postmoderne samenleving en haar soldaten" ("Moods at the home front – postmodern society and its soldiers"), in *Lessen uit Srebrenica* ("Lessons from Srebrenica"). Ed. Jan Weerdenburg (1998). Utrecht: Uitgeverij Prestige, p. 35-36.

sense of relief that the soldiers had come home safely dominated as one realized that the situation in Srebrenica had become increasingly dangerous. But, as evidence of war crimes committed by Mládić's troops was discovered, devastation and dismay became widespread among the Dutch public. The public debate in the Netherlands that followed the events soon became dominated by the haunting question 'How did we let this happen?'

The motives behind Dutch participation in the peacekeeping operation

The task Dutchbat was supposed to complete in Srebrenica, that is to protect the enclave and its citizens from Serbian aggression, has been described in retrospect as a 'mission impossible'. Therefore, one became preoccupied with the question how and why the Dutch became involved in this situation in the first place. In the aftermath of the events, most Dutch observers condemned the decision to provide the UNPROFOR with Dutch soldiers to dispatch to Bosnia, noting that the Netherlands decided to contribute troops despite the fact that every other U.N.-member refused to do so, and even though the Dutch Ministry of Defence and senior army officials were against it. The main motives to proceed with the decision were a sense of moral responsibility on the one hand, and a desire to play a more powerful role in the international community on the other hand, as will be discussed in the following sections.

In 1992, the Dutch national public environment had become pressing about intervening in the Yugoslavia conflict. Through media coverage, the Dutch public had become aware of the drama that was unfolding in the former Yugoslavia and as a

result a feeling of moral responsibility started to grow. According to a 1992 poll, 66% of the Dutch supported their country's participation in a military intervention and accepted the possibilities of casualties among their soldiers.³ Dutch Journalist Raymond van den Boogaard is convinced that in the decision to dispatch troops to Srebrenica, the Dutch collective memory of the German occupation played a role. Central to the Dutch memory of World War Two is a sharp contrast between the passivity of bystanders and the active role of the Dutch resistance – the former sadly being much more numerous than the latter. This, together with the crimes committed by Dutch collaborators, made a significant contribution to the relatively high number of Jewish deportees from the Netherlands during the war. According to Van den Boogaard, this collective memory has influenced discussions about public morality in the Netherlands ever since, and hence explains the public attitude in the 1990s that "something should be done". It created a public climate in which politicians could not afford to remain outsiders to the conflict.⁴ Activists such as Mient Jan Faber led the call for involvement and pressured politicians to act in order to combat injustice and human rights violations in the former Yugoslavia. Faber warned that if the international community would not undertake action to protect cities like Srebrenica and Sarajevo, they would become an accessory in an act of genocide.⁵

Peacekeeping was popular in the Netherlands, and had always been a main principle in Dutch foreign policy since it suited the small country and its resources well. With the changing geopolitical setting in the aftermath of the Cold War, the

³ Honig, Jan Willem and Norbert Both (1996). *Srebrenica: reconstructie van een oorlogsmisdaad* ("Srebrenica: reconstruction of a war crime"). Meppel: Het Spectrum, p. 171.

⁴ Van den Boogaard, Raymond (2005). *Zilverstad. De Haagse verduistering van het drama-Srebrenica* ("Zilverstad; The Hague's concealment of the Srebrenica drama"). Prometheus, p. 265.

⁵ Honig and Both (1996), p. 172.

Dutch Ministry of Defence and Foreign Affairs had started to restructure its policy and capabilities for international intervention. In the beginning of the 1990s, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs envisioned a larger role for the Dutch in international diplomacy, and meant to achieve this by contributing peacekeeping troops, hoping it would benefit the 'visibility' of Dutch foreign policy.⁶ Also the Ministry of Defence had begun to shift its focus since the end of the Cold War and declared that participation in U.N. peacekeeping operations was to play an important role in future defence policy. In its first memorandum after the fall of the Berlin wall, the Ministry announced a reduction of its armed forces, and the creation of the "11 Airborne Brigade", especially designed to perform peacekeeping missions and to serve in the NATO rapid reaction corps.⁷

In the early 1990s, the novelty concept of *safe haven* was applied to the northern Iraqi regions in protection of the country's Kurdish population, and won proponents among several prominent Dutch politicians. Politician Joris Voorhoeve, at that moment chair of the VVD, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, was one such outspoken advocate of the instalment of *safe areas* in conflict zones.⁸ In August 1994, Voorhoeve – a staunch supporter of the peacekeeping mission in former Yugoslavia – became Minister of Defence. As a consequence of his appointment, governmental support for Dutch involvement increased.

⁶ Honig and Both (1996), p. 174.

⁷ "Eerste defensienota na afloop van Koude Oorlog (03-1991)" ("First Defence memorandum after the end of the Cold War"), March 1991, The Dutch Ministry of Defence website. http://www.defensie.nl/landmacht/cultureel/geschiedenis/de_landmacht_na_de_koude_oorlog/eerste_defensienota_na_afloop_van_koude_oorlog

⁸ Honig and Both (1996), p. 146.

Thus, the motives behind the Dutch policy of involvement in Bosnia were a sense of moral obligation on the one hand, and a political wish for a bigger role of the Netherlands on the international political stage on the other hand. However, the validity of these motives has been seriously questioned in the aftermath of Srebrenica. Dutch scholars Jan Willem Honig and Norbert Both conclude that in their decision to provide troops for Bosnia, the Dutch were driven by a mix of unfeasible ideals and a feeling of moral superiority.⁹ While the Dutch population and parliament were eager to do something about the war, only few carefully considered what could actually be accomplished in Bosnia. Bert Kreemers, former spokesman of Minister Voorhoeve, has admitted that one of the motives of the Dutch government to support the missions in the former Yugoslavia was the need 'to take part'.¹⁰ The government made a series of mistakes in assessing the situation and did not pick up the negative signals sent by its NATO allies and her army personnel, convinced that it was setting the right example and that its allies would follow suit.¹¹

Inevitably, the debate about Srebrenica soon turned to the question of who was responsible for the genocide and whether it could have been prevented. The above writers and others alternate between attributing responsibility of the Dutch failure in Srebrenica to the soldiers and their commanders, to the Dutch government and to the international community. Their accusations will be assessed in the following sections.

⁹ Honig and Both (1996), p. 247.

¹⁰ Kreemers, Bert (2002). *De achterkant van de maan. Haagse schaduwen over Srebrenica* ("The far side of the moon: The Hague's shadows over Srebrenica"). Amsterdam: Prometheus, p. 19.

¹¹ Honig and Both (1996), p. 179-180.

Playing the blame-game: culpability and responsibility

Immediately after the revelation of the genocide, questions were raised and directed at Minister of Defence Voorhoeve and at the parliament. Numerous investigations and reports were ordered and issued in order to examine the question of who was responsible for the lack of intervention in the crimes. For example, in 1996, the U.N. published a research report, after which Secretary-General Kofi Annan declared that the U.N. was responsible for the mistakes made in Srebrenica, because it had sent too few troops and air reinforcements to the area and it had underestimated the situation.¹² Dutch politicians received the report with relief, and praised the U.N. for its ability to be self-critical.¹³ However, none of the reports satisfied critics. In fact, Dutch politicians, military officials and the returning Dutchbat soldiers awaited a long domestic 'trial' for their performance in Srebrenica.

The unsolved question of responsibility triggered extensive individual writing on the subject by journalists, academics, and by those that participated in the Dutch mission in Srebrenica. First, it should be noted that virtually all writers agree that ultimate responsibility for the genocide belongs to the Serbian politicians and officers in the highest ranks. Especially Jan Willem Honig and Norbert Both emphasize this fact, pointing out how well planned and organized the Serbian operation was. The offensive was tactically planned and the genocide was executed efficiently.¹⁴ They note that few people realize to what extent the genocide has been part of a deliberate

¹² "Srebrenica niet schuld Dutchbat" ("Srebrenica not Dutchbat's fault"), *NRC Handelsblad*, 16 November 1996.

¹³ Baehr, Peter. "Opluchting om Srebrenica?" ("Relief regarding Srebrenica?"), *Trouw*, 24 November 1999.

¹⁴ Honig and Both (1996), p. 241-243.

Serbian strategy. The killings might have been unique in terms of their size, but in intention they were not an exceptional event in the war in Bosnia.¹⁵

In their work *Lessons from Srebrenica*, Honig and Both attempt to reconstruct the drama in order to conclude what should have been done differently. The authors mainly criticize the international community for the escalation of events in Srebrenica, speaking sceptically about the 'United' Nations. According to them, the United Nations failed because moral incentives led to the formation of unrealistic goals, and because of the lack of collective will of the international community to use any degree of force.¹⁶ They claim that neither the instalment of *safe areas* nor the prevention of ethnic cleansing were feasible objectives, because the U.N. members lacked the political will to enforce security, and to risk more victims or hostages among their own soldiers than they had already sacrificed.¹⁷

Also academic J.S. van der Meulen is sceptical towards the international community: "The word 'community' suggests cohesion, or harmony even. That concept is of course deceptive".¹⁸ In order to support his view, he cites Ed van Thijn, who states: "The international community does not exist. It is a gathering of countries who all have their own agendas, which do not reach further than 'When will our boys come home?' and 'When can those refugees return to Bosnia?'".¹⁹

Activist Mient Jan Faber elaborates more extensively on the issue of culpability in his book *Srebrenica; the genocide that was not prevented*. Faber writes

¹⁵ Honig in *Lessen uit Srebrenica* (1998), p. 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁷ Honig and Both (1996), p. 249-250.

¹⁸ Van der Meulen in *Lessen uit Srebrenica* (1998), p. 40.

¹⁹ Cited in Van der Meulen in *Lessen uit Srebrenica* (1998), p. 40.

that his aim is for the parties involved "to acknowledge their responsibility and declare it in public; in order to start an open 'conversation' between them and the survivors of Srebrenica".²⁰ He does not accept the notion of 'shared responsibility'.²¹ According to Faber, the fact that the Dutch operated in U.N. context does not mean they cannot be held responsible for what happened. "Although such an assumption may be formally correct", he says, "at the end of the day the mission was being carried out by the Dutch".²²

Criticism of Dutchbat's performance

Since 1995, the question has been raised whether the Dutch troops could have prevented or limited the genocide, would they have acted differently. A vast amount of criticism is addressed to former commander of Dutchbat, Thom Karremans. He has largely been described as extremely passive, non-courageous and far from heroic. Journalists Westerman and Rijs blame Karremans for failing to pass on crucial information, and accuse him of siding with the Serbs, as he often spoke of General Mládić with admiration.²³ Karremans has called Mládić a phenomenal strategist and a colleague, and refuses to call him a war criminal.²⁴ In fact, Karremans is often portrayed as the pawn of General Mládić. This is also the consequence of the appearance of photo and video material that shows Karremans being friendly, almost brotherly with Mládić and even drinking champagne with him,

²⁰ Faber, Mient Jan (2002). *Srebrenica: De genocide die niet werd voorkomen* ("Srebrenica: The genocide that was not prevented"). Den Haag: Moretus, 2002. Published under the responsibility of the 'Interkerkelijk Vredesberaad', p. 8.

²¹ Faber (2002), p. 8.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²³ Westerman, Frank and Bart Rijs (1997). *Srebrenica: Het zwartste scenario* ("Srebrenica: The darkest scenario"). Amsterdam/Antwerp: Uitgeverij Contact, p. 189.

²⁴ Westerman and Rijs (1997), p. 189.

as if he is congratulating him on the conquest of the enclave. These images have been received scornfully in the Netherlands.²⁵

Already in 1998, Karremans responded to his critics in a book entitled '*Srebrenica. Who cares? A puzzle of the truth*'. The purpose of the book is to give an insight into the impossible task that Dutchbat faced. The preface emphasizes that this book is the story of the commander who was present at the scene – not of "one of the smart alocs who fought the war from their office in The Hague, Brussels or New York".²⁶ Throughout the book, Karremans seeks to make three main points: firstly, Dutchbat was left to itself by the Dutch government and the international community; secondly, the dilemmas that Karremans faced in his position as commander were extraordinary; and thirdly, the mission was unfeasible and Dutchbat was forced to stand powerless. Karremans mainly diverts responsibility to others, stating that "ultimately, the Dutch government and parliament carry responsibility and the army only has an executive task".²⁷

Karremans arguments are reinforced by the U.N. report that was published in 1996 and cleared Dutchbat from most of the blame for the Srebrenica tragedy. This report concluded that the lightly armed, 150 men strong Dutch battalion could have done little to prevent the fall of the enclave. According to the report, 2.000 Serbian soldiers were heavily armed with tanks and artillery, while Dutch requests for air support were repeatedly ignored by the U.N. command. However, the report noted

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

²⁶ Dick Wolterink, introduction to *Srebrenica. Who cares? Een puzzel van de werkelijkheid* ("Srebrenica. Who cares? A puzzle of the truth") by Thom Karremans (1998). Nieuwegein: Arko Uitgeverij, p. 13.

²⁷ Thom Karremans (1998). *Srebrenica. Who cares? Een puzzel van de werkelijkheid*. Nieuwegein: Arko Uitgeverij, p. 253.

that Dutchbat could have been stricter in communicating to the U.N. about the war crimes committed in Srebrenica.

Though many agree that defending the enclave had been impossible, it has often been argued that at least, the soldiers could have offered more protection to the Bosnian refugees. In the foreign press, the Dutch peacekeeping soldiers have even been branded accomplices to the war crimes. Also some Dutch commentators have made this serious accusation. Mient Jan Faber claims that Dutchbat assisted during some stages of the deportation and in the separation of Muslim men and women.²⁸ He suspects that the battalion thought that if the deportation would take place fast and without significant problems, this would benefit the soon and safe departure of Dutchbat from the enclave.

Dutch opinion magazines and newspapers were sometimes merciless in their criticism of the Dutch performance in Bosnia. For instance, on August 4, 1995, the weekly magazine *HP/De Tijd* entitled her edition 'Too sweet for war: the not so militant history of the Dutch army', discrediting historical missions of the Dutch army and branding Dutchmen as far from heroic. The categorization of the Netherlands as a non-military or anti-military country suddenly became issue of public debate. According to Van der Meulen, the Dutch felt that the shortcomings of their army might reflect an increasingly 'soft' and weak Dutch society.²⁹

Faber suggests that Dutchbat should have insisted to carry out the evacuation of the Muslims from Srebrenica. Because they failed to do so, what could have been

²⁸ Faber (2002), p. 63.

²⁹ Van der Meulen in *Lessen uit Srebrenica* (1998), p. 38.

an evacuation became a deportation.³⁰ Faber concludes his book with alternative scenarios, convinced that the genocide could have been prevented if the Dutch government and army had acted in a different manner: for example, had they insisted to carry out the evacuation themselves; had they fought back; or had they opened up their compound in Potocari for refugees.³¹ Westerman and Rijs also extensively discuss the role of Dutchbat as a witness of war crimes. They claim that 48 hours after the fall, Dutchbat already had information that suggested mass killings among the Muslim men.³² They accuse Dutchbat of not having shared this information with the world.

In addition to these controversies, rumours about inappropriate behaviour of Dutch soldiers were widespread. According to one story, a jeep with Dutch soldiers had allegedly driven over the bodies of killed men.³³ In the meantime, evidence was revealed proving that the Dutch soldiers had known more about the war crimes than they had initially admitted. In May 1998, *De Volkskrant* published part of the testimonies of five former Dutchbat soldiers. The veteran soldiers expressed fears that when they would make their experiences public, this could harm their future careers.³⁴ Indeed, soldiers and army top had so far refrained from talking about their experiences or about the events they had witnessed, presumably because they had been ordered to do so.³⁵ In addition, it was discovered that video films and pictures taken by Dutch soldiers that might have contained evidence of mass killings, had

³⁰ Faber (2002), p. 63.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113

³² Westerman in *Lessen uit Srebrenica* (1998), p. 14.

³³ "De twijfels over Srebrenica blijven" ("Doubts about Srebrenica remain"), *NRC Handelsblad*, 15 August, 1998.

³⁴ "Men kon zelfs the dood ruiken" ("One could even smell the stench of death"), *De Volkskrant*, 28 mei, 1998.

³⁵ Kreemers (2002), p.95.

been destroyed 'by accident'. The publication of stories like the above led to a growing general feeling that evidence and information was being hidden from the public.

The former Dutchbat soldiers perfectly sensed the indignation dominating the public debate. In the name of their entire battalion, they published a book called *Dutchbat, for the sake of peace*. When the soldiers presented the book during an official book release event, part of the press was not allowed to attend.³⁶ The soldiers declared they took issue with all the judgments, opinions, and "truths" that had been given. In their book, they emphasize that they deserve respect and appreciation.³⁷ Angry and embittered, they point out that the circumstances did not let them any choice than to stand by, and blame the authorities on whose order they had to act.³⁸

During the hearings of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), one of the soldiers mentioned in his testimony that what he had seen, was "worse than the movie Schindler's list".³⁹ Surveys have revealed that the number of Dutchbat soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder is two times higher than among soldiers who served in other missions. It has also been reported that they need twice the psychological assistance. Among the reasons for requesting psychological care, the soldiers have listed powerlessness during the fall

³⁶ Van der Meulen in *Lessen uit Srebrenica* (1998), p.39.

³⁷ Dijkema, Wim (ed.) (1996). *Dutchbat in vredesnaam. Januari 1995- juli 1995* ("Dutchbat in the name of peace. January 1995 – July 1995"). Rijswijk: Uitgeverij Début, p. 335.

³⁸ Van der Meulen in *Lessen uit Srebrenica* (1998), p. 39

³⁹ Banning, Cees and Petra de Koning. "Die passen hebben ze niet meer nodig" ("They won't need those passes no longer"), *NRC Handelsblad*, 3 April, 2000.

of the enclave, bad publicity about their performance in Srebrenica, and the guilt that was attributed to them for the genocide committed by the Serbian army.⁴⁰

In December, 2006, Minister of Defence Henk Kamp extended a decoration to the Dutchbat soldiers who served in Srebrenica. According to the Ministry, they had been unjustly blamed for the fall of the enclave for years. To rehabilitate Dutchbat's efforts, the soldiers received a special insignia, and a memorial plaque was revealed on the military base in Assen. According to the Ministry, the insignia made Dutchbat's recognition visible, while the plaque would provide the soldiers with a place to convene and to commemorate what they went through.⁴¹ Yet, during the ceremony, protesters gathered outside of the base, holding a 60 meters long banner with the names of those killed in Srebrenica.

Criticism of the Dutch government

The Dutch government has been vehemently criticized for the way it handled affairs in 1995 and after. In 2005, Raymond van den Boogaard published a book called *'Zilverstad; The Hague's concealment of the drama Srebrenica'*. The title summarizes the main point of his book, being that in the aftermath of Srebrenica, the politicians in The Hague spent all of their time trying to avoid and to cover up the issue. "For years The Hague has tried to dissociate 7.000 death from Dutch involvement: through producing fallacies, blaming others, and making a set of complete and incomplete revelations. The Dutch public soon lost track as to what

⁴⁰ "Srebrenica-missie gaf verdubbeling trauma's" ("Srebrenica-mission multiplied traumas"), *De Volkskrant*, 22 June, 2005.

⁴¹ "Zichtbare erkenning Dutchbat III" ("Visible recognition Dutchbat III"), 6 December 2006. Website Dutch Ministry of Defence.
http://www.defensie.nl/actueel/nieuws/2006/12/04/4696689/Zichtbare_erkenning_Dutchbat_III

was true and what not".⁴² Repeatedly, controversial stories came to light that placed the ministers in awkward positions. In the end, "all of it was just a joke that seriously damaged the image of politicians as honest people [...] for as far as the Dutch public had held this image in the first place".⁴³ The strategy of Dutch politicians was that of avoidance, finally passing on the whole affair from politics to science when they gave the order for the official investigation by the *Netherlands Institute for War Documentation* (NIOD) – an investigation which would at least take four years and would result in an enormous collection of facts without judgments.⁴⁴

Criticism at the Dutch government is mainly directed at the Minister of Defence at the time, Joris Voorhoeve. He has engaged in numerous efforts to clarify himself in public; in speeches, talk shows and newspapers. He has also made a constant endeavour to rehabilitate the Dutch soldiers that were present in Srebrenica. He is often cited saying that "accusing Dutchbat is like criticizing somebody that managed to save three out of five drowning persons and that is subsequently being accused of not having saved the other two".⁴⁵ Bert Kreemers used to be the spokesman of Joris Voorhoeve and wrote a book called '*The far side of the moon*'. In this book, he presents the immense dilemmas the Minister faced, having to consider the safety of the Dutch soldiers and the safety of the civilian population in the enclave at the same time.⁴⁶ His work was made difficult because of the lack of trustworthy and qualitative information about what was going on in the enclave. In February 1999, Kreemers published an op-ed in *NRC Handelsblad* in which he accused the army top of

⁴² Van den Boogaard (2005), p. 258.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 264-265.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

⁴⁵ Cornelisse, Louis. "Voorwaarden aan nieuwe uitzendingen" (Preconditions for future missions), *Trouw*, 31 oktober 1995.

⁴⁶ Kreemers (2002), p. 61-64.

covering up information, and in which he calls for a parliamentary investigation in order to reveal the truth about what happened in Srebrenica. As a result, Kreemers was fired.⁴⁷

The Ministry of Defence was presented with the moral dilemma of sacrificing its own soldiers in an attempt to prevent or to limit the severity of the ethnic cleansing. As soon as the enclave fell in Serbian hands, Joris Voorhoeve declared *lotsverbondenheid* – meaning 'solidarity' but more literally 'linkage of fate' – between the Muslims and the Dutch soldiers. Nevertheless, it was not clear to anyone what the application of this concept should exactly look like. Mient-Jan Faber regrets the fact that Minister Voorhoeve did not in any way desire an active, intervening policy from Dutchbat regarding the safety of the Muslim men and boys. In his view, Voorhoeve's policy was to avoid any risks and to focus on the safe departure of Dutchbat. As a consequence, the fate of the Muslim men and boys became of secondary importance.⁴⁸

Finally on 10 April, 2002 the highly anticipated NIOD report was published. In short, the 3393 pages long report concludes that humanitarian and political ambitions moved the Netherlands to engage in a peacekeeping mission that was not well considered and that was basically unfeasible.⁴⁹ According to the NIOD report, the mission had been carried out under a mandate too vague. At the time, the concept *safe area* had not been clearly enough defined, while Dutchbat was sent on a

⁴⁷ Bik, J.M. "Slecht gevoel op Defensie" ("Bad feeling at the Defence Ministry"), *NRC Books*, 26 April 2002.

⁴⁸ Faber (2002), p. 110.

⁴⁹ Parlementaire enquête Srebrenica (2002-2003). Official Parliament webpage on the parliamentary survey. Retrieved from:
http://www.parlement.com/id/vh8lnhrpmxvc/parlementaire_enquete_srebrenica_2002

peacekeeping mission in an area where there was no peace. In fact, UNPROFOR was "in between fire" considering the fact that the demilitarization of the enclave had been incomplete. In addition, Dutchbat was not adequately trained for its specific tasks in these specific circumstances. Finally, it was stationed in Srebrenica without a clear exit strategy.⁵⁰ An additional conclusion was that Minister of Defence Voorhoeve was aware of the infeasibility of the mission already 1994. It was also determined that the Ministry of Defence had not cooperated sufficiently in the process of gathering facts on what happened and had deliberately withheld information. Prime Minister Wim Kok was criticized because he would not have fulfilled his duty as Prime Minister properly.

During the presentation of the report, a furious and disappointed Mient Jan Faber left the room together with a number of survivors of Srebrenica, calling the report a "falsification of history".⁵¹ According to them, the Dutch government had once again refused to admit any responsibility. Also Dutch academics received the report with criticism. Their main concerns were that the report had not been critical enough in its examination of Dutchbat's performance, and did not adequately highlight the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence.⁵²

A few days later on 16 April 2002, as a consequence of the outcome of the NIOD investigation, Prime Minister Wim Kok resigned, which implied the fall of the entire Dutch cabinet. With his resignation, Prime Minister Kok accepted political co-

⁵⁰ "Srebrenica: Reconstruction, background, consequences and analyses of the fall of a 'safe' area," (2002). Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, p. 3414.

⁵¹ Van Loon, Alok (2005). *Vrouwen van Srebrenica* ("Women of Srebrenica"). Amsterdam/Antwerp: Uitgeverij Contact, p. 79.

⁵² Brouwers, Arnout and Annieke Kranenberg. "Wetenschappers: NIOD is te mild voor Dutchbat" ("Academics: NIOD is too soft on Dutchbat"), *De Volkskrant*, 20 April, 2002.

responsibility for the fact that the Dutch soldiers did not manage to prevent the massacre. Nevertheless, according to critics, an apology was still lacking. Dutch author and activist Alok van Loon notes that "accepting the responsibility for a failed policy and the acknowledgement of enormous suffering of people because of it, are not the same as apologizing".⁵³ According to her, the Dutch government never made any excuse, while this was exactly what survivors were waiting for.

Eventually, after the resignation of Kok's cabinet, The House of Representatives decided to order the long demanded parliamentary investigation into the events of Srebrenica, its background and its aftermath. The task of the investigative commission was to examine the performance of the Parliament, the government and other stately and military persons responsible in order to pronounce a final political judgment on their performance. In the opinion of Raymond Van den Boogaard, the parliamentary investigation came far too late since it was ordered at the moment that Srebrenica had completely lost its political relevance.⁵⁴ "At that moment, most politicians whose image could be damaged as the result of such an investigation, had retired or had left the political scene, as had the soldiers".⁵⁵

Still, the hearings brought new facts to light. For instance, it was confirmed that the Dutchbat soldiers had been forced by the army top to remain silent about their experiences. Moreover, it was widely declared that during the mission, the Dutch could not count on the United Nations. Wim Kok, Joris Voorhoeve and Hans van Mierlo, respectively the responsible Prime Minister, Defence Minister and Foreign Minister at the time, all declared that the international community had left

⁵³ Van Loon (2005), p. 79.

⁵⁴ Van den Boogaard (2005), p. 259.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Dutchbat alone in their mission. None of them thought that Dutchbat could have done more. Yet, in its final report in January 2003, titled "Mission without peace", the survey commission concluded that the Netherlands had "an entirely own responsibility" regarding the drama Srebrenica. The commission concluded that the resignation of the cabinet-Kok-II had been a correct move.

It should be noted that despite the widespread criticism on the performance of Dutchbat and on the decisions taken by the government as described in the previous sections, it is unlikely that the Dutch public would have supported an intervention in a situation that was extremely dangerous and which would have caused numerous victims among the Dutch soldiers – without a guarantee that it would have prevented the genocide. Bert Kreemers claims that not only the government, but also a large majority of the Dutch population prioritized the safe homecoming of their soldiers over the evacuation of all residents of Srebrenica.⁵⁶ Indeed, the issue of sacrificing soldiers is a difficulty inherent in peacekeeping missions. Probably more than in other types of military missions, there is an effort to keep the amount of casualties at a minimum. Domestic politics is a great factor in this calculation. Casualties are tolerable by the public as long as there is real belief in the mission and the feasibility of the military objectives.⁵⁷ As a result, one is only willing to take little risk, which in turn can make the mission ineffective. This can be illustrated with examples from Somalia and Lebanon, from which the United States quickly withdrew its troops after heavy casualties. Therefore, the most important consideration in deploying peacekeeping soldiers into a region should be whether the situation is actually

⁵⁶ Kreemers (2002), p. 77.

⁵⁷ Cited from Martin Shaw *Civil Society and Media in Global Crises*, in Van der Meulen in *Lessen uit Srebrenica* (1998), p. 42

suitable for a peacekeeping mission. If not, the mission will be doomed to fail; the case of Srebrenica being the disturbing evidence for this allegation.

Consequences of the Srebrenica affair for international peacekeeping

In the aftermath of the Srebrenica drama, criticism was voiced regarding the nature of the intervention and its mandate. The main criticism is related to the instalment of so-called *safe areas* in Bosnia and whether it was applicable to the situation on the ground. On 16 April, 1993 the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) had adopted Resolution 819 in which it condemned the Bosnian-Serb paramilitary violence, their attempts to illegitimately acquire territory, and the practice of ethnic cleansing. Because of the perceived urgency of the humanitarian crisis that was unfolding in Srebrenica, the UNSC declared Srebrenica a *safe area*, "which should be free from any armed attack or any other hostile act".⁵⁸ It is however rather unclear how the *safe areas* were supposed to be protected in practice by UNPROFOR, and in retrospect, it has been seriously debated whether the situation was at all suitable for the instalment of a *safe area*. Karin Landgren has suggested that the U.N. should reconsider safety zones by prioritizing the need for consent, the necessity for a clear distinction between combatants and non-combatants, and continuing commitment to the basic principles of international humanitarian and refugee law.⁵⁹ One could add that the instalment of *safe areas* should be accompanied by a demonstrated readiness of member states to act upon such a decision. Honig and Both observe that although the categorization of Srebrenica as

⁵⁸ United Nations Security Council Resolution 819, adopted on 16 April 1993. Retrieved from: <http://www.un.org/Docs/scres/1993/scres93.htm>

⁵⁹ Landgren, Karin (1995). "Safety Zones and International Protection: A Dark Grey Area", *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 7 (3), p. 436-458.

safe area might have been a firm diplomatic statement, none of the U.N. members acted in order to enforce the safe areas. In particular, no country was willing to ensure the security of these areas through the implementation of force.⁶⁰

Besides, the decision to dispatch peacekeeping troops to the area of Srebrenica should be questioned because there was no 'peace', or an intention towards it. Rather, the Serbian troops were stepping up their violent actions, some of which indicated a policy of ethnic cleansing. Considering that the concept of peacekeeping relies on the strategy of 'deterrence by presence', such a strategy could only work if all parties involved show a compelling intention to reach an end to the conflict, in both words and deeds. If this is not the case, the peacekeeping mission becomes too challenging and the situation is in fact more suitable for *peace enforcement* – which involves a different mandate and equipment.

In the case of Srebrenica, the Dutch troops basically came to provide humanitarian assistance, and most importantly, to function as the 'barbed wire' that would dissuade the Serbians from entering the enclave and threatening the Muslim community. Yet, violence was ongoing and the Bosnian-Serb army was constantly threatening to overtake the enclave, not deterred in any sense by the presence of the blue helmets. Interestingly, journalists Westerman and Rijs note that the reaction of the Bosnian Muslims to the soldiers also deviated from what was expected: "The Bosniaks do not understand the peacekeeping; why do soldiers walk around there out in the open, and paint their vehicles *white*?"⁶¹ According to the two journalists, within a short time even the Dutch U.N.-soldiers themselves were confused about

⁶⁰ Honig and Both (1996), backcover.

⁶¹ Westerman and Rijs (1997), p. 117.

what was expected of them. Eventually, the peacekeeping forces became ineffective due to their vulnerability as peacekeeping force, hindering the soldiers to provide the most fundamental humanitarian aid.⁶²

The Srebrenica affair was reason for the U.N. to submit the concept of peacekeeping and *safe areas* to serious scrutiny. In the late 1990s, the double trauma of Rwanda and Srebrenica led the U.N. to carry out a self-investigation in order to establish the weaknesses of the organization's peace and security operations. The results of the investigation, led by Lakhdar Brahimi, were published in 2000 and contained a number of important recommendations regarding international peacekeeping. First of all, the report suggested increasing the dispatch of fact-finding missions to areas of tension. Moreover, the report recommended new threshold conditions for engaging in peacekeeping operations, such as consistency with international human rights standards and practicability of specified tasks and timelines (in terms of appropriate equipment and the size of the contingent, among other things), an achievable mandate, and the need for a clear chain of command and unity of effort.⁶³ Finally, another important recommendation in the report was the need for improved consultation and cooperation between troop-contributing countries. The report also concluded that the U.N.'s refusal to make a distinction between victim and aggressor had caused the organization a great loss of credibility.⁶⁴

The report was taken serious by the U.N., but did not discourage the

⁶² Honig in *Lessen uit Srebrenica* (1998), p. 17.

⁶³ "Comprehensive review of the whole question of peacekeeping operations in all their aspects," UNSC Report, 21 August, 2000. Accessible at: <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/34/a34res53.pdf>

⁶⁴ Vreeken, Rob. "Macht noch vrede" ("Power nor peace"), *De Volkskrant*, 1 December, 2012.

organization from continuing its peacekeeping missions. In fact, since then, the amount of peacekeeping troops has grown. The U.N. reiterated this commitment in 2005, as Kofi Annan introduced the sacred principle of 'Responsibility to Protect', meaning that the world should not be allowed to stand by while crimes against humanity are committed. Also the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs has continued to actively promote peacekeeping missions as its ultimate foreign policy instrument. Only a few years after Srebrenica, the Dutch government decided to dispatch peacekeeping troops to Eritrea and Sierra Leone, among other war-torn places. The Dutch advocacy of peace operations is consistent with the high value the country seeks to attach to policy matters such as human rights and international law.

More than ten years after the 2000 U.N. report into peacekeeping missions, former head of the investigation committee Brahimi recalled in an interview how the failed missions in Rwanda, Somalia and Srebrenica in the 1990s raised doubt about peacekeeping operations. However, he noted that nowadays, such operations have been revived. In 2008, the U.N. reached its peak with 110.000 dispatched troops; "the largest amount of troops in the world after the United States". But, Brahimi warns, "[...] we have to be careful. The Security Council is again taking decisions of which it knows they won't be easy to carry out".⁶⁵ According to Brahimi, the Secretary-General does not carefully enough consider accepting peacekeeping mandates, and the feasibility of the missions such as those in Congo and Darfur.

Others have argued that the main problem is the 'commitment gap' between what is stated in UNSC Resolutions and the resources its member states are actually

⁶⁵ Vermaas, Peter. "Sommige lessen lijken vergeten" ("Some lessons seem to have been forgotten"), Interview met Lakhdar Brahimi. *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 21 May, 2008.

willing to devote.⁶⁶ Another important problem remains the assessment of the situation as suitable for peacekeeping. Mandates should not be static. It is recommended that the U.N. regularly reassesses the security situation in areas where U.N. peacekeeping troops have already been stationed, in order to determine whether peacekeeping troops are still the appropriate approach, or whether the mandate should be adjusted. An example of the consequences when such flexibility is lacking could be witnessed on the Syrian-Israeli border in recent years. Having been stationed at a relatively quiet border for over forty years, U.N. peacekeeping troops started facing an increasingly dangerous situation as Syria descended into civil war in early 2011. The kidnapping of 19 Filipino U.N. peacekeeping soldiers by Syrian opposition forces constituted another warning for the U.N. to reconsider the mandates of peacekeeping missions in areas where the situation on the ground is changing.

Srebrenica as a Dutch national trauma

Almost twenty years after the Srebrenica massacre, the event still regularly surfaces in the public debate in the Netherlands or in the national news. Survivors and family members of victims of the massacre are seeking recognition and justice until this very day. Commemorations by survivors and lingering court cases remind the public of the atrocities committed. For example, every year on July 11, a commemoration for the victims of Srebrenica is held in The Hague.

⁶⁶ Gray, Christine (2001). "Peacekeeping after the Brahimi report: Is there a crisis of credibility for the UN? *Journal of Conflict & Security Law*, 6 (2), p. 267-288.

In 2007, family members of the victims of the genocide pressed charges against the U.N. and the Dutch state for providing insufficient protection to the Muslims in the enclave.⁶⁷ In 2010, Dutchbat translator Hasan Nuhanovic and family members of the Rizo Mustafic, electrician of Dutchbat, pressed charges against Karremans and his colleagues Deputy Commander Franken and Adjutant Oosterveen for handing over Mustafic's and Nuhanovic's father and brother to the Bosnian-Serb army and refusing them to stay at the compound. Eventually in 2012, the Dutch court decided not to prosecute the commanders on these charges, because they had found insufficient evidence for their responsibility.⁶⁸ However, in September 2013, the Supreme Court of the Netherlands ruled that the Dutch State was to be found responsible for the death of the three men, noting that it was the Dutch State which had the "effective control" over its troops.⁶⁹ This case potentially paved the way for other compensation claims over the failed peacekeeping mission.

Apart from that, in April 2012, the Dutch Supreme Court ruled that the United Nations cannot be tried for failing to prevent genocide against Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica. A summary of the ruling said that "the U.N. has the most far-reaching form of immunity and cannot be prosecuted by any national court".⁷⁰ Lawyers representing a group of 6,000 survivors calling themselves 'the Mothers of Srebrenica', said they would appeal against this decision at the European Court of Human Rights, which they did in October of the same year. These trials show that the

⁶⁷ "Overlevenden Srebrenica klagen Nederland en VN aan" ("Srebrenica survivors press charges against the Netherlands and the U.N."), *Trouw*, 4 June, 2007.

⁶⁸ "Geen strafrechtelijk onderzoek naar Srebrenica" ("No criminal investigation into Srebrenica"), 7 March, 2012. Press release by the prosecution Office of the Dutch state. Accessible at: <http://www.om.nl/@160556/persbericht/>

⁶⁹ "Nederland aansprakelijk voor Srebrenica" ("The Netherlands responsible for Srebrenica"), *SpitsNieuws*, 6 September, 2013.

⁷⁰ "U.N. can't be tried for Srebrenica massacre -Dutch court," *Reuters*, 13 April, 2012.

controversies surrounding Srebrenica are far from overcome. Moreover, it should be noted that public trials of those responsible for large-scale crimes greatly capture public imagination and contribute to the shaping of collective memory.⁷¹

In the Netherlands, the Srebrenica affair contributed to a painful and often emotional national self-investigation.⁷² The Srebrenica debacle became a national trauma for the Dutch, as can be concluded from the writings discussed above, but also from art-expressions. Especially the image of the hopeless spectator unable to intervene is central to every metaphor that has been invoked. A good example of this is the song 'Our own Vietnam' that appeared on the 1997 album of the Dutch punkband 'De Heideroosjes'. A sample of the lyrics:

If the trees in former Yugoslavia could talk
they could tell you a little story
A story you don't wanna hear,
a story of hate, aggression, rape and fear
The almighty United Nations sent out troops to
control the situation
But while showing the world their superiority,
they got fooled and became
part of the genocide of a nation
And now they find the bodies of ten thousand
slaughtered men
We have our own Vietnam!
[...] All this time during that war they told us, LIES, [...]
And now they can no longer say 'we did what we could' [...] LIES!⁷³

Raymond van den Boogaard concludes from such art-expressions that Srebrenica has become a metaphor for Dutch shortcomings when it comes to

⁷¹ See for example Mark Osiel's and Joachim Savelsberg's works on law and collective memory.

⁷² Klep, Chris and Richard van Gils (2000). *Van Korea tot Kosovo: de Nederlandse militaire deelname aan vredesoperaties sinds 1945* ("From Korea to Kosovo: the Dutch military contributions to peaceoperations since 1945"), Meppel: Giethoorn/Ten Brink, p. 133.

⁷³ De Heideroosjes, "Our own Vietnam" lyrics.

heroism and truth-love and leave an impression of moral decay, of mendacity.⁷⁴ Also the play '*Srebrenica!*', which is a satirical version of the events that took place in Srebrenica and Dutchbat's role therein, raised such general questions about changing values in Dutch society.

Notably, the events in Srebrenica have also reminded the Dutch of World War Two, when their fellow Jewish citizens were deported while too few Dutch people engaged in significant acts of resistance. In fact, the analogy with World War Two and the German occupation of the Netherlands returns in various writings about Srebrenica. The journalist and author Leonard Ornstein has expressed his belief that in Dutch history, Srebrenica will become a symbol for standing passively while watching the helpless being killed in a merciless manner.⁷⁵ The feeling of guilt among the Dutch nation explains, amongst other things, the fact that the Netherlands has been one of the main donors to support the reconstruction of Bosnia and the survivors of Srebrenica financially.⁷⁶ All of the activities related to Srebrenica - ranging from writing to demonstrating and from discussing to donating money - are attempts to deal with a national trauma. The Srebrenica affair will inevitably come to constitute an important part of the Dutch collective memory.

Conclusion

Despite the number of investigations, publications, court-cases and political consequences that have followed in the years after the Srebrenica-massacre, the question of responsibility remains a sensitive issue in Dutch politics and society. A

⁷⁴ Van den Boogaard (2005), p. 43.

⁷⁵ Ornstein, Leonard. In "Preface" to *De achterkant van de maan* (2002), p. 7.

⁷⁶ Van Loon (2005), p. 80-81.

number of Dutch reports as well as a U.N. report initially cleared the Dutch state and soldiers from principal responsibility. Yet from the extensive amount of Dutch writing and analyses in response to what happened in Srebrenica, one can conclude that the Dutch felt the obligation to approach the issue as a party that had been directly involved in, and possibly responsible for, the events. Therefore, they engaged in discussing responsibility and culpability, and in thoroughly examining what could have been done differently. Especially among the Dutch soldiers that participated in the mission, the debacle has left a bitter aftertaste to say the least. Also the government faced immense criticism in the years that followed. Although the resignation of a cabinet over the Srebrenica issue in 2002 was welcomed, it was also perceived as a move 'too little, too late'. Especially among the survivors and the family members of the victims of the massacre the feeling dominates that although the Dutch government may have conceded a share of the responsibility, it has not declared that it is guilty, neither has it issued an apology. The outcome of recent court-cases in favour of the family members of the victims may help the survivors to cope with this issue.

To the Dutch government, the Srebrenica affair brought the realization that participation it should first of all assess the feasibility of the peacekeeping mission, and not be guided merely by a sense of morality. Inevitably, the Srebrenica trauma has influenced present considerations about contributing to peacekeeping missions. For instance in 2011, a debate took place about sending a non-combatant police training mission to Afghanistan. Notably, parliamentarians insisted that four F-16 fighter jets would be sent with the soldiers, since the Netherlands had learned the

hard way that it "should not rely on air support from other countries" in case of trouble, considering what happened in Srebrenica.⁷⁷

The Srebrenica affair catalysed an international debate about peacekeeping. As a result of the Srebrenica affair and the events in Rwanda, the U.N. revised its attitude towards peacekeeping missions and its approach towards the notion of *safe areas*. In subsequent missions, the U.N. has sought to improve the efficacy of peacekeeping mission by a careful assessment of the conflict situation, an appropriate equipment and contingency size, and more intimate cooperation between involved parties. Nowadays, in the event that peacekeeping soldiers tend to find themselves in danger, the Srebrenica events are almost always recalled as a warning for the risks of peacekeeping missions. The most important consideration in deploying peacekeeping soldiers into a region should be whether the situation is actually suitable for a peacekeeping mission; and this situation should be constantly reassessed.

⁷⁷ Van der Laan, Cees. "Steun Afghanistan-missie nog nooit zo fragile geweest" ("Support for Afganistan mission has never been so fragile"), *Trouw*, 24 January, 2011.