

Working Group for Bosnia and Herzegovina

June 16, 2023

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
US Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

As members of the Working Group for Bosnia and Herzegovina, a U.S.-based group advocating for justice and for the protection of human and civil rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), we are seeking the immediate cessation of the construction of a museum at the former site of the Heliodrom Concentration Camp in Mostar, BiH. We appeal to your office to take resolute action to prevent this flagrant suppression of historical memory and violation of human rights.

The museum was initiated by the Croatian Democratic Union [*Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica* (HDZ)] with the intent to commemorate the Croatian Defense Council [*Hrvatsko vijeće obrane* (HVO)], the military forces that established and operated the concentration camp and committed atrocities which the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) recognized as among the most egregious war crimes committed in BiH. Operated under the auspices of the unrecognized territory of Croatian Republic of Herceg-Bosna during the aggression, the Heliodrom Concentration Camp is an enduring symbol of the atrocities inflicted upon innocent civilians by the HVO.

The ICTY found that the Heliodrom Concentration Camp was established by the HVO under the auspices of a Joint Criminal Enterprise that sought to permanently remove Bosniaks from the so-called “Herceg-Bosna” in order to establish a “Greater Croatia.” The ICTY case of Prlić et. al., documented the systematic campaign of detainment and human rights abuses perpetrated by the HVO within the Camp against Bosniak men, women, and children.

It would be simply inconceivable for a museum commemorating the *Wehrmacht*, the *SS (Schutzstaffel)*, or the *Einsatzgruppen*, for example, to be established at the former site of a Nazi concentration camp. Such an act would rightly be deemed abhorrent. Similarly, the world cannot permit the creation of a museum at the former site of the Heliodrom Concentration Camp, which would normalize and legitimize the crimes committed against innocent individuals during the Bosnian War. This ill-conceived museum project is a flagrant violation of our shared commitment to preserving historical memory and human dignity, and to preventing impunity for crimes against humanity.

In light of these grave concerns, we implore you to exercise your authority and take immediate action to halt the museum’s construction at the former Heliodrom concentration camp in Mostar. We urge you to utilize all available channels, legal mechanisms, and diplomatic influence to ensure that justice is served and historical truth is preserved. By standing resolute in rejecting this museum, you will send a powerful message that the international community will not tolerate the glorification of war crimes or the erosion of our shared values. The world is watching, and the victims and survivors deserve nothing less than our unwavering support.

Unfortunately, this is not the only example of HDZ-initiated constructions designed to suppress historical memory and persecute the Bosniak community. The HDZ-controlled Mostar government is resuming its construction of a Croatian National Theater in a historic Bosniak Lakišića Harem cemetery (Lakišić Cemetery), land that has been legally owned and operated by the Islamic Community of BiH [Islamska Zajednica BiH] for hundreds of years. Denying the Islamic Community the right to operate and use the land of the Lakišić Cemetery, the local HDZ government continues to ignore local building inspection decisions asking for secession of the construction of this theater. Accordingly, we ask you to please consider any action taken with respect to the construction of the HVO museum at the Heliodrom Concentration Camp in the context of a wider anti-Bosniak effort that the HDZ has been implementing in Mostar and other HDZ-controlled areas.

Instead of building a museum to commemorate the HVO army which was responsible for the construction and operation of these concentration camps, we propose the installation of a solemn and dignified plaque inscribed with the acknowledgment that a concentration camp once stood on this site between 1993 and 1994. This commemorative plaque would serve as a powerful reminder of the atrocities committed. The plaque would mark a sacred place at which we would be able to gather annually on April 22 to honor the victims and acknowledge the tragic history that unfolded within those walls.

We cannot overstate the urgency of this matter and the tensions it is causing in the local community. Delaying our collective response would only perpetuate the suffering endured by the victims and compromise the integrity of our global commitment to justice and human rights. We urge you to act swiftly and decisively in the face of this callous violation of moral principles and international standards.

Thank you for your immediate attention to this critical issue. We anticipate your unwavering commitment to justice, historical accuracy, and the protection of human rights.

Sincerely,

The Working Group for Bosnia and Herzegovina

cc: The Honorable Christian Schmidt, High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina,
The Honorable Michael J. Murphy, United States Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina,
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights