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## Merhamet

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# Relief effort kept Sarajevo from starving

*On April 16, the Schiller Institute delegation visited the headquarters of Merhamet, the Muslim charitable organization that, in coordination with the Catholic charity Caritas, the Jewish La Benevolentia, and the Orthodox Dobrotvor, helped to keep the citizens of Sarajevo alive during the four-year siege. The delegation was received by its president, Edah Becirbegovic, and two of its vice presidents, Dr. Abdulkerim Fazlic, and Dr. Edhem Traljic. This transcript is abridged.*

**Edah Becirbegovic:** I am particularly happy that you are visiting Merhamet, the organization that I have been leading for some time, from the beginning. And I would like to inform you briefly about the organization of Merhamet.

Merhamet is a Muslim charitable society, and it was founded in 1913, which, practically, means, that it worked through both the First World War and the Second World War. In the Second World War, it played an extremely important role, working on the accommodation of the refugees and the expelled persons from eastern Bosnia.

In 1946, the communists and the communist regime banned Merhamet as one of the societies which had religious connotations, as well as all other societies from the same field—religious societies. The activities of the society were reestablished on Feb. 2, 1991. It was owing to a number of donations both from the country and from abroad that we became an organized humanitarian society. Especially during this war, we contributed a lot to having the expelled accommodated and sheltered.

### A unique organization

This is the only organization of this type in the country. During this war, we have been importing humanitarian aid, in quantitative terms of speaking, more than all other organizations of this type together, except for UNHCR [UN High Commission for Refugees]. We have a network of our committees throughout Bosnia and Hercegovina, in all municipalities. Our organization tries to set up our units and organizations anywhere where the Bosniaks live. So we have some of our units in Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, Croatia, Slovenia, Canada, and Australia.

Various units of ours have greatly contributed to the

work of Merhamet here, so that the role played by Merhamet in this war was really very important. Even during the war, we were thinking of the organization and activities of Merhamet *after* the war, in the time of peace. We were aware and we are aware that once we had peace, the interest of the world in Merhamet, in Bosnia-Hercegovina would drop; and that is why we decided to set up, ourselves, some production plants, which should play a double role: first, to start up production, and thus to create financial resources to cover Merhamet programs; second, the humanitarian aspect of all of this, which is getting socially vulnerable categories of the population employed.

So, whenever possible, in these plants which we set up, we try to employ the disabled persons and the members of the families of the fighters who were killed.

We founded an enterprise called BosMert. The basic aim of the enterprise is to make a profit, and to finance our activities by that profit. Then we also started and opened a number of farms: sheep farms, rabbit farms, brood-hen farms, poultry farms, and the farms where we grow different crops. A breeding center is being built, for goats. There is a fish farm in Travnik.

As to the humanitarian aspect of our activities, we have a number of pharmacies, and a center for the manufacture of orthopedic appliances, with the most modern technologies for the implantation of joint prostheses.

I would like to mention the results that have been achieved only one year after we reestablished our activities. I also want to point out that although our population was hungry, nobody *died* of hunger.

Now, we think that Merhamet is in a phase, and society is in a phase, when it is the government that should take care of feeding the population, and Merhamet should go back to its previous activities, such as getting the people employed. I would be the happiest person, if, in the foreseeable future, there were no need for such an organization, because this would mean that we no longer had any socially vulnerable categories of people; but, unfortunately—well, the philosophy is that Merhamet and its activities will be needed in the future, at least 50 years. We are grateful to all those who helped us and supported us to gain such results; and we gladly offer our cooperative hands. Thank you for coming here.

**Dr. Jozef Miklosko:** We are from various countries, various regions. We have tried to help the process of peace along. The Schiller Institute has done this for the last five years, from the very beginning. And we are now trying to lead the campaign, visiting various church organizations, universities, to organize support for Bosnia, first of all for the children, but also politically, at the same time.

We want to impress upon governments the need to change their policy toward Bosnia-Hercegovina, to offer general debt forgiveness, because we know that Bosnia

should not have to pay 17% of the former Yugoslavia debt as the condition to get some other money from these international institutions. We are fighting for this.

For us, it seemed the debt forgiveness is the easiest way to do something for the Bosnians. Debt reorganization can lead to a general reconstruction, similar to the Marshall Plan after the Second World War, for Bosnia.

### Cooperation of four faiths

**Becirbegovic:** I feel bound to mention that some prejudices should really be eliminated, speaking about interreligious and international relations. From the very beginning of Merhamet as an organization, and during the whole of the war, every Friday, in this room, there have been meetings of the representatives of Caritas; Dobrotvor, which is the Orthodox charitable society; La Benevolentia, which is Jewish; and Merhamet, the Muslim charitable society, in which we talk about and agree upon joint activities.

Our attitude is that there are no genocidal nations. No religion instructs or teaches violence; but, there *are* genocidal policies. So, let's fight those genocidal policies, and *not* the nations and the peoples or religions as wholes.

Unfortunately, the prejudices, and particularly in western Europe, against Islam, and the Muslims in Bosnia, created a disastrous situation. It is impossible to understand and accept the fact that for four years, someone could sit and watch what was going on, without offering help—not only not offering to help and stop the bloodshed; but, by imposing an embargo, not to let that people defend itself. That was disastrous.

That is why we think that the civilized world shares con-

siderable responsibility for what has happened in Bosnia. At the very moment that the Western world really wanted to stop the bloodshed, it did so. But up until then, a lot of evil had already been done and a lot of crimes had been committed here. This war has greatly unbalanced and spoiled the relations among the peoples here. We are doing our best; we are fighting to prove that it was not the responsibility and the fault of the peoples, the nations here, but the policies behind the peoples.

**Theo Mitchell:** Did you mention a Christian charity, also?

**Translator:** Yes. Caritas is Catholic; Dobrotvor is Orthodox; La Benevolentia is Jewish; and Merhamet is Muslim. So, all the four religions of the people who live in Sarejevo, in Bosnia, all of them, every Friday, we meet here. And at the moment we have a joint campaign—all four societies.

**Mitchell:** And that campaign is?

**Becirbegovic:** It is a campaign for glazing windows. The basic criterion for assistance is that a family has a person over 60 or children under 5 years of age. There are no criteria with respect to religion, or nation. [Most of the windows in buildings were blown out during the four years of shelling of Sarajevo by the Serbian Army. Providing windows before the winter sets in will therefore be a crucial task.—ed.]

**Mitchell:** What about the orphans?

**Becirbegovic:** We have special campaigns relating to orphans. But this is a criterion of age that we are applying, in this context, in this specific campaign. We had similar campaigns throughout the war. We coordinated them all together.



Officials of the Merhamet Muslim humanitarian association welcome the Schiller Institute delegation. Left to right: Umberto Pascali, Ben Swan, Theo Mitchell, Merhamet President Edah Becirbegovic, Jozef Miklosko, Paolo Raimondi, Nihad Dzinovic, Merhamet Vice President Dr. Abdulkerim Fazlic, Elke Fimmen, James Mann, and an official of Merhamet.

**Mitchell:** What are your priorities? And what do you seek for the future?

**Becirbegovic:** As I said just a minute ago, during the war, the *whole* population was a socially vulnerable category here. So we opened a number of soup kitchens, public kitchens, trying to provide at least *one* meal a day for every person. As I said, people really were hungry, but still they survived; they didn't die of hunger.

You may not know that, on average, each person in Sarajevo lost ten kilograms [22 lbs.] during the war. So, if it had not been for those soup kitchens, the population in Sarajevo *would* have been dying of hunger.

Now, of course, the situation has changed for the better, since recently the blockade of Sarajevo has been lifted. So the humanitarian societies do not feel responsible for feeding the *whole* of the population. And that's why we accept it as our task, to take care of the disabled, the families of the fighters who were killed, and the most serious cases of diseases and patients, and the people who live alone, who have no families.

So, we have developed programs. For the disabled we opened the center, as I was telling you. Then, for the disabled and the members of their families, we have been opening some production plants. And, for the orphaned children, we are trying to get scholarships; we have a special program for caring for the socially vulnerable individuals who have no families to live with.

So, this is a project through which we would like to care for and provide for the bed-ridden patients, old and frail persons. We would like to extend health care to their homes; and, we have been doing that, in some places in Bosnia already. This program will also cover the paraplegics, of which the number, unfortunately, is large, obviously.

In recent months, we have facilitated the distribution of over 100,000 food parcels, mostly for the children. However, we do not consider it our primary activity. We place the priority on getting people employed. And these programs where, through which we try to get people employed, do not make us afraid of getting people used to being helped and supported, because we're trying to help get people employed so that they can care for themselves, provide for themselves.

We set up a dental clinic. And it operates on purely humanitarian principles. Last week, we opened a beauty parlor, a cosmetic salon. The profits of the salon will cover the expenses of the dental clinic.

*Mr. Becirbegovic also described how Merhamet was branching out into providing construction materials for reconstructing buildings in Bosnia.*

**Mitchell:** I think it's commendable that Merhamet has involved itself so readily to provide jobs for people. Can you tell us approximately how many?

**Becirbegovic:** I mentioned that the one in Sarajevo employs 30 people. Unfortunately, I do not have total numbers

of people who got employed through us, but I'm sure of a few hundred.

**Mitchell:** What is the greatest obstacle to restructuring here?

**Becirbegovic:** So far, it was the import blockade. Now, it's financial. We could do, and could have done, a lot more, if we had the support of donors for these projects.

A little while ago, I had a telephone call from our ambassador to Spain. And he told me that there was a shipment of humanitarian aid on the way from Spain to Bosnia, consisting of mostly second-hand clothes; some food; and some medical supplies; and, he was asking me to receive the shipment.

The freight cost for that shipment will come out to be much higher than if we had bought the things ourselves here. We will take over the shipment ourselves here, of course, just as a sign of gratitude to the people who tried to do their best; but, I also asked our ambassador, to look for donors who would buy and pay for goats that we need for our breeding center project.

**Paolo Raimondi:** We want to reaffirm that, when the members of the committee go back to our countries, we will raise this question of the Marshall Plan, for debt relief. We have seen, from meeting the religious, political leaders from all the different communities in Bosnia, that time is now of the essence. Five months have passed by, without any of the other reconstruction, and we are approaching the end of the Dayton Accord period.

For the future, there are 180,000 soldiers who should be sent home and will become unemployed. So, I think that those who would go further with this kind of paper war are preparing another crisis—some consciously, and others unconsciously. So it is *our* task to raise these issues, to raise a political fight in the United States and western Europe. This is nothing new from what has been going on for the last four years; but, nothing happened in the last four years. Nothing really happened. And it would be unacceptable, *intolerable*, that in one month, we would lose the peace simply because we do not act.

What the American Constitution says, if it is true for the Americans, is true also for the other countries of the world: The principles of independence, national sovereignty, the inalienable rights of all mankind.

This is probably the best support that we can promise you. We ask you to help us, because you have the moral authority, because of the last four years, to tell the Western governments, and the people in the United States and the rest of the world, what *they* have also to do. So, we have invited delegations to come to the United States. We are also discussing the way to work with the religious representatives, at up to the highest levels, to create this movement, because if we lose Bosnia, it is not only Bosnia—as every Bosnian here knows, but in the West it is not known—we lose community, integration, respect of human dignity. I think that either we *win the battle here*, or Europe and the United States will lose at home.

I also want to situate something we should have raised

before: Ben Swan was a friend of Ron Brown, the U.S. commerce minister who was killed, and it was a dramatic loss of life and opportunity. I think there was a very serious commitment behind his idea, and now we have to take that responsibility.

**Ben Swan:** We want to mobilize in America to support President Clinton, in his effort to make possible the kind of aid that was being organized. Because he didn't have the full support of the Congress; he was going around Congress. So, because of the election year, there will be some opposition to him from the opposition party. But, we want to mobilize the citizens to give him support, so he can help, so that the political climate will be conducive to getting some of the private investment, supported officially by the government.

I believe that if there is such a delegation as has been proposed, that comes from Bosnia, it would go a long way in helping us to mobilize. You can provide information firsthand, pertaining to the groups that we need to pull in. And so, we extend an invitation.

**Becirbegovic:** Thank you. And I would like to point out that the fight for Bosnia is the fight for democracy, basically. Bosnia is going to survive only if we manage to establish democratic institutions, intelligent institutions. The West can preserve Bosnia, but it can also act in such a way that Bosnia disappears. Should Bosnia disappear, that would be the defeat

of the West and its civilization, and that would be a degradation of all the principles on which civilization is based. That would be a negation of universal principles and values: conscience, freedom, human rights; and, I'm glad to hear that you are fighting in Bosnia, not only for Bosnia's sake, but for the survival of a civilization, on which the Constitution of the U.S.A. is also based.

**Mitchell:** That's what I was going to say, because what you just enunciated is the foundation upon which the United States of America depends, with all the problems we still have. If the country does not rise to *this* occasion, then all the principles that put the United States in its place, will have eroded, and it's only a matter of time before it will be destroyed.

**Becirbegovic:** That's why I'm really thankful to you. I'm aware of the fact that, globally speaking, Bosnia is a small country. I'm sure that 90% of the people in the United States would say they had never heard of this country, had there never been this war. But it is here that there are people who are really asking only for the *minimum* of human existence, who want to live in accordance with their conscience—in reconciliation with their conscience. So, here we have the fight for, really, *universal* values and principles; and, if we don't defend them here, then it would be a defeat for those who could have done much more, and didn't do it.

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