Serving Coffee in Chicago for Srebrenica’s Missing

Bosnian-born artist Aida Sehovic placed thousands of cups of coffee on a Chicago square to mark the anniversary of the 1995 Srebrenica genocide, creating a unique memorial that tells the public how the victims died.

Every year on July 11, Aida Sehovic and her team of volunteers pour coffee into thousands of small ceramic cups and lines them up on a city square somewhere in the world.

But the people that the coffee was made for never show up to drink it.

Some of them are being buried that day at the memorial centre in Srebrenica after their remains have been exhumed from mass graves and identified by forensic experts.

Most of them have already been buried in previous years; some 1,000 more are still believed to be missing.

Sehovic's temporary monument, entitled ‘STO TE NEMA’, or ‘WHY AREN’T YOU HERE’, is aimed at raising awareness about the slaughter of thousands of Bosniak men and boys from Srebrenica 22 years ago, which international courts have ruled was an act of genocide. A total of 8,372 victims have so far been named.

Coffee was served this year at Chicago's Daley Plaza on Tuesday.

“We purposefully do not have any signs, flags or banners about the monument on site, so that people who pass by initially have no idea what we are doing and why,” Sehovic told BIRN.

“Eliminating any kind of symbols that might separate us allows people to simply approach and ask questions,” she said.

Drinking coffee out of small cups is a social event in Bosnia, a ritual that brings families, neighbours and friends together.

Sehovic’s cups filled with the dark beverage are to attract people to stop and ask what it's about. They are then informed about the genocide and about why it is important to remember and talk about the
thousands of Srebrenica victims.

“When I work with communities which host the monument in each city, and especially the volunteer team which is there on site on July 11th, we talk a lot about how to create an inclusive and welcoming space which everyone feels that they belong to, and that can be part of this commemoration regardless of their personal connection or history to Srebrenica, or Bosnia,” she explained.

After living in Germany and Turkey as a refugee of the 1992-95 Bosnian war, Sehovic emigrated to the United States in 1997, where she completed her art studies.

She said the initial idea for the project came to her out of frustration - she thought there was nothing she could do for the cause. She wanted to create a space for herself and others to do something, “regardless of how small or symbolic that gesture might be”.

“I could have never imagined that something that began as a one-time performance 12 years ago would turn into a participatory nomadic monument that travels all over the world, creating awareness, empathy and solidarity for the Srebrenica genocide,” she said.

Sehovic has already displayed her temporary monument in the Bosnian towns of Sarajevo and Tuzla, in several cities in the US, including at the UN headquarters in New York, as well as in Geneva (Switzerland), Toronto (Canada), Istanbul (Turkey), Stockholm (Sweden) and The Hague (Netherlands).

It takes her and the volunteers all day to prepare the traditional Bosnian coffee and place the small filled cups, called *fildzan*, at the site. The number of *fildzans* keeps growing each year, donated by Bosnians around the world.

There is never a shortage of help either.

“I am amazed every year how much our communities in the diaspora, and everyone else who encounters ‘STO TE NEMA’, want to be part of it once they see what it is and that there is room for them to get involved,” Sehovic said.

A whole range organisations representing the Bosnian diaspora in the US got involved in this year’s effort - led by project coordinator Asja Dizdarevic, it was organised and supported by the Bosnian and Herzegovinian Club of Chicago, the Bosnian American Genocide Institute and Education Center, the Bosnian-North American Women’s Association, the Bosnian Islamic Cultural Center, the Islamic Cultural Center of Greater Chicago, the Society of American Bosnians and Herzegovinians, the Bosniak Cultural Community Preporod of North America and the Association of Srebrenica Survivors.

“By uniting survivors and everyone else directly or indirectly affected by the Srebrenica genocide, ‘STO TE NEMA’ highlights that any genocide is a crime against humanity, and therefore a crime against all of us,” Sehovic said.