

The Federal Government had abandoned its responsibility to help forge an international structure to prosecute war criminals in conflicts such as those in Bosnia, the former head of the disbanded Special Investigations Unit, Mr Bob Greenwood, QC, said yesterday.

Mr Greenwood said he retained "a glimmer of optimism" that awareness would eventually increase of the importance of international justice for minorities who were international crime victims. He retained this hope despite the disbanding of the unit and the acquittal last month in Adelaide of Mr Ivan Polyukhovich.

"The important issue is that the (Polyukhovich) trial was held," he said. "The fact that such a trial could take place was unthinkable 10 years ago."

Speaking at a seminar on war crimes legislation at the **Sydney Jewish Museum**, Mr Greenwood strongly criticised the Federal Government for closing the unit in June 1992 and said "political and bureaucratic inertia" had bedevilled its work. The unit was established in 1987.

"What we set up was a framework of professional expertise ... which could readily be adapted to a more contemporary investigation," Mr Greenwood said.

The Government had made absolutely no attempt to keep any of the unit's expertise.

"To have some sort of a mechanism to even be informed of what the Bosnian situation is all about, they should have retained some expertise," he said.

Mr Greenwood said his work at the unit was based on "the proposition that the sooner a true structure or matrix of international criminal law can be established the better" for the preservation of civilisation.

He said the introduction of Australia's war crimes legislation had been a step towards widening the jurisdiction of Australian courts and international tribunals to deal with war crimes and crimes against humanity in an organised system of justice.

Mr Greenwood said Australia's War Crimes Act needed amendment because it covered only war crimes committed in World War II in Europe.

He said the unit had investigated more than 800 individual cases at less cost than the "very important" investigation of a single case, the death of the Australian Federal Police Assistant Commissioner Colin Winchester.

After the unit was disbanded its work was continued by a War Crimes Prosecution Support Unit.

Mr Greenwood said that whenever he felt he was making progress at the unit, he ran into "yet another brick wall".

He was critical of bureaucrats in the Attorney-General's Department and said most Department of Foreign Affairs officers were "intelligent but without brains", referring to his need for detailed research abroad and close liaison with many governments.