

## **Analysis: Ex-KLA Chiefs Indicted**

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International prosecutors in Kosovo charge four former KLA commanders with war crimes.

Back in January 1998, an ethnic Albanian journalist in Pristina solemnly assured me that a series of mysterious killings being blamed on a shadowy organisation called the Kosovo Liberation Army were in fact the work of Serbs.

Her logic went like this: no Albanian she knew had met the KLA. Nobody knew if it really existed. And all the victims were Albanians – men suspected of being collaborators.

For her, it was much more logical that the killings were the work of Serbian secret services, intent on discrediting the pacifist policies of the Kosovo Albanian leader Ibrahim Rugova by blaming it on a fictional militant group.

In fact, through no fault of her own, she was wrong: these killings were indeed the work of the KLA, which was just starting operations, with Albanians as its first victims.

Military experts say there were good reasons for these crimes - at least from a tactical point of view. A guerrilla army needs secrecy, which means getting rid of collaborators.

Some believe, however, there were occasions when the charge of treachery was used as an excuse to settle old scores.

Killings of ethnic Albanians continued throughout the war, and have now come back to haunt the organisation, with the indictment last week of four guerrillas commanders for war crimes.

These indictments come not from The Hague, but from an international prosecutor working in Kosovo's own courts.

The four include a war hero, commander Rustem Mustafa, known as Remi, plus three of his junior commanders, all from the northeastern part of Kosovo.

They are alleged to have kidnapped, beaten, tortured and killed Albanians suspected of being collaborators, between August 1998 and June 1999.

Commander Remi made a name for himself as a tough military leader. Indicted with him are Ljatif Gasi, Naim Kadriu and Nazif Mehemi, all charged with both personal and command responsibility for the torture and murder of Albanian civilians between August 1998 and June 1999.

Remi's reputation took a hammering last year when he was among several former KLA leaders, now serving with the UN-financed Kosovo Protection Corps, who were blacklisted by the United States, accused of trying to destabilise the Balkans by interfering in the war in Macedonia.

He was arrested in August, and thousands of Albanians took to the streets of the capital, Pristina, to protest his innocence.

In the beginning of the war - a period not covered by these charges - for every alleged collaborator killed, many more were scared away.

A good number suspected of treachery woke to find somebody had put a chair on their front path, or left a bag of coffee outside their front door - a custom used in villages to mark the house where there has been a recent death. The message was clear - it was a final warning to leave.

With the outbreak of full-scale conflict in March 1998, the killings of Albanians by Albanians retreated into the background.

But they appeared again that summer, when a second, rival, guerrilla force arrived, named FARK.

FARK was sent into the field by Kosovo exiles who supported Rugova, or at any rate preferred him to the KLA leadership.

For a time it looked as if, in addition to fighting the Serbs, Albanian rebels might begin fighting each other.

This, however, did not happen because FARK never managed to gain a strong following while the KLA became synonymous with a genuinely popular uprising, comprising many different groups.

As the KLA grew in size so the power and influence of its original leaders diminished. FARK, meanwhile, became simply another of many disparate groups within the movement.

By later summer 1998, the KLA's inexperienced units were anyway in retreat as Serb attacks escalated, and FARK melted away. In Drenica, a handful of FARK officers joined the local KLA bands, giving them military advice.

But this did not stop the killings among Albanians.

In the autumn, I was among journalists warned not to travel to an area in the west of the province, because of a "rogue unit" that, other KLA units said, was more interested in banditry than genuine warfare.

KLA leaders even told the OSCE ceasefire monitors who arrived in October that if there was fighting in this area, they should not worry - because it was Albanians attacking each other, not the Serbs.

Of course, Albanian civilians were not the only murder victims. More than 200 Serbs remain missing, their relatives not even given the consolation of being told where to find the remains of their loved one.

On one occasion, KLA guerrillas stopped a train going through Drenica. They searched the carriages. In one, they found two Serbs, an off duty soldier and a policeman. The soldier was left to continue his journey. The policeman was taken off and never seen again.

But there are as yet no prosecutions against the KLA for crimes against the Serbs, largely because the Serbs refuse to cooperate.

Both locally and nationally, Serbs say the war crimes investigations are biased in favour of NATO, and without their testimony, prosecutors say they cannot build cases.

The result of this first case will be keenly watched.

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