

Arrests Divide Bosnian Partners

Author: [Jovan Kovac](#)

Bosnian Federation partners are split over the arrest of Croat war crimes suspects

Political tensions in the Bosnian Federation are running high after seven high-ranking Croat interior ministry officials resigned over the arrest of Croat war crimes suspects.

The officials, who include the Deputy Interior Minister, Ivan Bacak, claim the arrests had been concealed from them. Their political representatives, the Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, warned that Croats could no longer work in the ministry until it was brought into line with the "law and the constitution".

Bacak said the manner of the arrests reflected mistrust between Muslim and Croat parties in the federation.

The controversy was triggered two weeks ago with the arrest of war crimes suspect Domink Ilijasevic, alias Como, at his café in the central town of Kiseljak. Ilijasevic along with his paramilitary unit "Maturica" are alleged to have been involved in several massacres in central Bosnia, including the murder of 16 Muslims in Stupni Do on October 23, 1993.

After the war, Ilijasevic, together with members of his paramilitary unit, continued to terrorise local Muslims and Croats and run protection rackets.

Bacak complained that neither he nor any other Croat officials in the ministry were informed of the arrest. The UN later admitted as much, claiming some had previously helped suspected Croat war criminals to escape arrest. "Unfortunately during several operations there were information leaks coming out from the ministry when efforts were being made to detain indicted Croat criminals," said the UN police spokesman, Douglas Coffman.

The allegation provoked the resignation of Bacak and his colleagues. Their protest shows they're more concerned about political and bureaucratic considerations than the need to deal with Bosnian warlords and criminals.

The UN, charged with overseeing the Bosnian police force, has insisted the resignations will not impede the work of the interior ministry, as hundreds of other Croat employees continued to work there.

Coffman made a point of urging them to stay. "It is important that Croats continue working in the joint institutions," he said. "Without their participation the rule of law would be undermined."

Just days after the Ilijasevic's arrest, a member of his gang, Vlatko Buzuk, was also arrested as he attempted to cross into Croatia. Another associate, Tibor Prajo, subsequently handed himself in to police in Kiseljak.

A spokesman for The Hague Tribunal said it had given the "green light" for the arrest of the suspects who would be tried in Bosnia.

Following the seizure of Ilijasevic and his accomplices, the Croatian police arrested two more Bosnian Croats, Tomislav Vlajic and Ante Sliskovic, in Zadar, charging them with involvement in the Ahmici massacre on April 16, 1993, when over a 100 Muslims, including women and children, were killed. Two other suspects are being sought.

The arrests follow increased co-operation between Zagreb and The Hague Tribunal. Prime Minister, Ivica Racan, said the detentions reinforced the rule of law in Croatia, "In this country, those who work will feel good and those who are responsible for [economic crime] and war crimes will feel ill at ease."

Police spokesman, Emil Bilic, said the arrests followed a lengthy investigation which was frequently undermined by state interference. "Certain state officials kept in touch with the suspects and helped them hide and escape," he said.

Croatian media reports had earlier suggested that the country's secret services had helped to protect the four suspects and that the late president, Franjo Tudjman, had been considering ways of frustrating The Hague Tribunal's probe into the Ahmici massacre.

Notwithstanding attempts to obstruct their investigations, it seems that Zagreb and Sarajevo have finally decided to do something about Bosnian Croat warlords and criminals, who not only remain at large, but are deeply involved in politics and business.

Jovan Kovac is a regular IWPR contributor

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