

BELGRADE ALLEGES NEW ASSASSINATION PLOTS

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Following its accusations of a French-led attempt on the life of Slobodan Milosevic, Belgrade authorities have pressed charges against a Serbian group for plots against the president and opposition leader Vuk Draskovic.

On Wednesday (January 5) a Belgrade military court began reviewing evidence against seven men accused of belonging to a secret organisation the Serbian Liberation Army (OSA). The men are charged with plotting to assassinate Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, the commander of the Third Army, General Nebojsa Pavkovic and the former commander of the Pristina corps and current chief of staff of the Third Army, General Vladimir Lazarevic - as well as opposition leader Vuk Draskovic.

The men were arrested between December 17-29, 1999 and charged with membership of OSA - "a terrorist organisation, whose members swore an oath to change the system in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia [FRY] by force," according to the court.

The military court also stated that "responsibility for the assassination attempt on the president of the Serbian Renewal Party [SPS], Vuk Draskovic, was an illegal action attributable to the group." This is the first time that the Yugoslav authorities have described the car accident, in which four members of Draskovic's party were killed, as "an assassination attempt".

First on the list of accused men is Lieutenant Boban Gajic, 26, from the Belgrade suburb of Batajnica and a regular officer in the Yugoslav army (VJ). The other six men are all civilians from Krusevac in southern Serbia.

One of the accused Milutin Pavlovic, 46, said he was aware such a group existed to fight "Albanian terrorists following the withdrawal of the VJ forces and police from Kosovo". Pavlovic denied the group had planned any assassinations. Pavlovic also denied supplying arms to OSA.

An IWPR source from Krusevac claims that among those arrested are three former VJ reservists who deserted their posts in Kosovo in mid May 1999 during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. But following threats of courts-martial, the three men returned to Kosovo and remained there until their units withdrew following the signing of the military-technical agreement with NATO.

According to a court official, who requested to remain anonymous, the arrests were made by Serbian police officers following charges brought by the VJ investigation department. The source claims the arrests followed a coordinated operation by the VJ and the Serbian Interior Ministry.

The source in Krusevac claims the three VJ reservists had publicly stated they were prepared to return to Kosovo as members of a small, covert group and if necessary to join so-called illegal members of the VJ still operating inside Kosovo. The source said the three men probably wanted to redeem themselves for their earlier desertion.

This is a second time in less than a month that the Yugoslav authorities have accused a group of planning to murder Milosevic. In December Yugoslav Minister for Information Goran Matic announced the arrest of five men accused of belonging to a covert group called Spider, which it was alleged also planned to assassinate Milosevic.

The political use of such plots seems evident. In February the ruling Serbian Socialist Party (SPS) is scheduled to hold its annual congress and Milosevic is expected to use the occasion to re-assert his mandate as leader over the party and put in place a new strategy for the SPS and the ruling coalition.

"The possibility that someone in the country wants the president dead should increase unity among people and strengthen their desire for resistance", said one anonymous source from the SPS. Asked about suspicions among some commentators that the charges are not genuine, this source refused to comment.

The charges provide a kind of vindication for the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO), which has insisted that the October car crash in which several people were killed and party leader Draskovic only luckily escaped was an assassination attempt.

But Draskovic and the SPO have always insisted that the Serbian secret police had arranged the accident, in which a lorry laden with sand ploughed into two cars carrying SPO politicians. The Belgrade authorities have consistently denied any wrongdoing and the courts dismissed claims of police involvement.

Why then has the government suddenly acknowledged the accident was an assassination attempt?

On January 10 the SPO and other opposition parties are scheduled to meet to discuss strategy. By accepting the crash on October 3 was in fact an assassination attempt, the government may be hoping to placate Draskovic and limit the scale of anti-regime activity acceptable to the SPO at the January meeting.

Draskovic was infuriated by the regime's refusal to take the assassination attempt claims seriously and launch a full investigation. But he also has a long history of finding accommodation with the regime. By laying the blame on the OSA, the Serbian authorities have to some extent met SPO demands, while deflecting accusations of state involvement. A few weeks after the crash, the OSA did in fact claim responsibility via a faxed declaration.

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