Belgrade Funding in Jeopardy

Yugoslavia stands to lose out financially unless it agrees to cooperate with The Hague by the end of June.

Yugoslavia is fast approaching a crucial choice - whether to pass the bill on cooperation with The Hague, which will pave the way for extradition of Slobodan Milosevic, or see its economy crumble into chaos.

Unless the bill is passed soon, the United States will not take part in a conference of donor nations on June 29. This may prompt other participants to withhold funds sorely needed to rescue the country from the ravages of war.

But the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS, is determined not to miss out on possible funding. Since its partner at the federal level, the Montenegrin Socialist People's Party, SNP, formerly a close ally of Milosevic, refused this week to back a bill on cooperation with The Hague, DOS has been frantically trying to salvage the situation.

One fantastic idea currently under consideration is ratification of the five-year-old Dayton Peace Agreement. The document, which Milosevic signed, commits Yugoslavia to working with the tribunal.

In the absence of a better solution, DOS believes this could provide a legal framework for the extradition of Yugoslav war crimes suspects to The Hague.

Such is the importance to Serbia of the proposed funding that the main DOS factions, led by Yugoslav president Vojislav Kostunica and Serbian prime minister Zoran Djindjic, are united over the need to somehow cooperate with The Hague.

It is believed both leaders have given assurances to the West of their willingness to do so.

Adoption of the cooperation law was one of three conditions set by the United States for attending the donor conference. The other two were commencement of proceedings to extradite Milosevic and other war crimes suspects.

Prime Minister Djindjic said DOS would work with The Hague, with or without the SNP. And he accused the SNP of trying to obstruct Yugoslavia's integration into the international community.

Other DOS member parties have been equally incensed by the Montenegrin party's stance. Serbian justice minister Vladan Batic accused the SNP of putting at risk the donor conference and the survival of the Yugoslav federation.

He said it was high time Serbia ceased being held hostage by Montenegro, and that Serbian citizens should now be given the opportunity to decide whether they want to continue living together with Montenegrins.

Economic expert Bosko Mijatovic warned that America's failure to attend the donor conference could bring crippling results for Serbia. He said the anticipated aid package, worth $1.2 billion, might be halved.
were to happen, Mijatovic believes, Serbia would be most probably torn apart by grave economic crisis and
social unrest.

Failure to secure the funding, analysts say, could result in the collapse of the Serbian government. And
members of an influential economic lobby led by federal deputy prime minister Miroljub Labus have said
they will resign if the donor conference fails.

Djindjic claimed that Kostunica himself had promised the State Department during a visit to Washington
last month that the extradition law would be passed by the federal parliament in June.

Numerous other sources in the ruling coalition claimed Kostunica had assured President Bush that
Milosevic would eventually be handed over to The Hague after he was tried in Belgrade for corruption and
abuse of power.

Now all eyes are focussed on what Hague chief prosecutor Carla Del Ponte will do. She is due to submit an
annual report to the UN General Assembly by the end of June. Its contents may influence Washington
stance on the donor conference.

Significantly, Del Ponte's spokeswoman Florence Hartmann says there is no need for a new law on
Belgrade's cooperation with the tribunal. "The prosecutor is not much interested in the manner in which
the results are achieved, but the results themselves," said Hartmann.

Serbia has previously claimed that such legislation is necessary because the federal constitution does not
allow the extradition of Yugoslav citizens to other countries.

But this view is weakening in government circles - particularly after the SNP bill rejection - with Djindjic
arguing that the authorities may not even need to implement the proposed law on cooperation.

Some legal experts in Serbia have long maintained that the proposed legislation was unnecessary since
the tribunal is not a foreign state but an organ of the United Nations to which Yugoslavia belongs. In any
case, time is running out for discussion of legal niceties.

Whatever the solution they come up with, once it is accepted in parliament, DOS will move quickly. First, it
will pledge itself publicly to handing over Milosevic to The Hague after first being tried in Belgrade. This
would be followed by extradition of several of the 25 Yugoslav citizens indicted by the tribunal.

According to unconfirmed reports from inside the DOS, Veselin Sljivancanin, a Yugoslav army colonel
charged with committing war crimes in Vukovar in 1991, may well be among the first suspects to be
transferred.

Two other Yugoslav citizens charged with mass killings of Bosnian Muslims in the north-eastern Bosnian
town of Visegrad, and two Bosnian Serbs from Foca accused of the rape of Muslim women, may be the next
to go.

All of this needs to be done speedily, as the end of June is just around the corner.
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