

Belgrade's French Connection

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Yugoslav authorities have arrested five Serbian paramilitaries, accusing them of working for the French secret services to assassinate President Milosevic.

Belgrade's spectacular accusations against five "French spies" chart a murky web of terror and covert operations involving everyone from Albanians and NATO to the French secret services and Zaire.

The core charge - of a Paris-run plot to assassinate the Yugoslav president - may prove, in the words of one French official, to be little more than "fantasies".

But the vast array of allegations thrown up by the Yugoslavs will cause embarrassment in France, and provide high-charged fuel for Belgrade's on-going domestic propaganda campaign rallying support for Slobodan Milosevic.

The five men - reservists in the Yugoslav Army (VJ) who served as members of a special unit in Kosovo during the NATO bombing - were arrested on November 11 by Serbian authorities.

But little information about the affair was released until Yugoslav Information Minister Goran Matic held an extended press conference on November 25, in which he detailed alleged plans to assassinate the president.

According to the minister, the men are all members of an organisation called 'Spider', taking instruction from Paris. France has denied all accusations of involvement in the affair. ``These allegations are groundless," French Foreign Ministry spokesman Francois Rivasseau told reporters. ``It is completely absurd."

But the head of the team, Yugoslav Petrusic, 38, who has a record of atrocities in Bosnia, served as a mercenary in the Democratic Republic of Congo (then Zaire) in 1996 on behalf of President Mobutu Sese Seko. There have been several allegations of French assistance for these mercenaries. Petrusic is reported to have dual Yugoslav-French citizenship [See following story.]

Matic claims the men had been working on four different scenarios for killing Milosevic, including a sniper attack, a car bomb, an explosive device on the street, or an assault on the president's residence by a team of 10 commandos.

"The arrest of this group and the documentation gathered shed new light on the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the involvement of France in that process," Matic declared, in remarks repeatedly aired on Serbian state television and given heavy play in the daily newspapers.

But Milosevic has not been their only target, according to Yugoslav authorities. Formal charges against the five have already been made in Belgrade District Court, including espionage and the killing of Kosovo Albanians.

The charges were brought November 14, before an investigative judge; at the time, the faces of the accused were concealed, and their names withheld.

Police sources have also told IWPR that, having infiltrated the VJ, the group provided data to the French for the NATO forces during the bombing campaign. Matic alleges that they were under orders of the French secret service to liquidate 'Remi', a commander of the Kosovo Liberation Army, because he had "slipped out of control of the French."

The group, with as many as 30 members, operated for 25 days in Kosovo under the name "Balkan Express". Although failing to kill Remi, Matic said they committed several crimes against Albanians in the vicinity of Decani, in order to place the blame with Serbian forces.

After the bombing, the five moved to Montenegro where, Belgrade authorities allege, they worked with special forces of President Milo Djukanovic, who is seeking independence from Yugoslavia. These special units operated in hotels in Zlatica, Mojkovac and in the vicinity of Kumbor, the minister said.

The five men are all Serbs who, Matic claimed, served in a paramilitary formation in Bosnia known as the '10th Commando Company', which was involved in the 1995 Srebrenica massacre. At the press conference, Matic also laid blame for Srebrenica on Philippe Morillon, the French general who was UN military commander in Bosnia.

Petrusic, also known as 'Yugo Dominik' and 'Baladin', "has been a member of the French intelligence service for some 10 years," Matic alleged.

"His paramilitary group was controlled by French intelligence, not Republic Srpska." According to Matic, the other members of the group are Milorad Pelemis, 36, a Bosnian Serb; Branko Vlaco, 47, a Bosnian Serb from Vogosca, outside Sarajevo; Rade Petrovic, 26, a Bosnian Serb; and Slobodan Orasanin, 44, a Yugoslav citizen.

Pelemis is known for his involvement with paramilitary groups in Bosnia; and Vlaco, for being a prison warden in Vogosca.

Both are believed to be under investigation by the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague. Matic claimed the men have been offered immunity from prosecution by The Hague on the condition that they cooperate.

If true, Yugoslav authorities would be unlikely to turn them over to the international tribunal, given the kind of evidence against top Serbian figures that they could offer its prosecutors.

Matic accused Petrusic of up to 50 killings on behalf of the French, including the killing of Bosniak paramilitary commander Juka Prazina, in revenge for the death of two French officers in Sarajevo, and a role in the assassination of another Bosniak in Switzerland in 1994.

The Yugoslav minister says that acting under high level French supervision, he also was involved in several killings in Algiers. More recently, Matic says, he met with Croatian Foreign Minister Mate Granic.

Matic also noted that one of the accused is a "specialist for killings with a truck full of sand". This was interpreted as an allusion to the accident in early October involving opposition leader Vuk Draskovic in which several of his family and colleagues were killed.

The truck involved was filled with sand; Draskovic has alleged that it was an assassination attempt by the Yugoslav security service.

This is not the first time Petrusic has been arrested. Last May, he and another of the accused were arrested by military police on the highest orders. They were detained for 20 days in military custody, before being released due to a lack of evidence.

One of the key pieces of evidence for espionage charges, according to one of their colleagues who may be called as a witness in any proceedings, is "the accused talking on the phone in a foreign language".

At the District Court hearing a week ago, evidence still seemed thin. Charges for killing Albanians in Kosovo were reduced from crimes against the civilian population to the lesser charge of so-called ordinary murder.

They are now formally accused of killing two Albanians, although the identities of the victims and the time, place and details of the killings are not known. This is in addition to the charge of espionage, for which, under Yugoslav law, they face sentences of at least 10 years' imprisonment.

The five arrested are also charged with illegal possession of arms. This charge is punishable with jail time, but it is rarely invoked - and usually used only when firm evidence for other criminal charges cannot be assembled.

Petrusic's lawyers, Nikola Nikolic and Goran Foci, disputed the right of a civilian court to hear such charges, and argued that the case before the military courts was already closed. Based on Matic's press conference Thursday, however, it is expected that fresh charges will be formally added.

Explanations for the Matic's performance, and the wide sweep of his accusations, vary. Some Belgrade analysts suggest that the move against Petrusic and associates indicates a rivalry between the army intelligence service and the state security service.

Others believe the government is identifying individuals as culprits for the killings in Kosovo - implying that the leadership itself was not responsible.

Recently Boban Petkovic, a Kosovo Serb, was arrested along with an army reservist, charged with killing three Albanians in May 1999. Djordje Simic, a policeman from Orahovac involved in one of the killings, has also been charged. Such accusations come as a shock to many in Serbia, who believe that any methods are justified in the fight against "terrorists".

French newspapers have speculated that the allegations were also intended to undermine the UN's authority in Kosovo. The UN's chief administrator there, Bernard Kouchner, is French.

Whatever the facts of the case, months after the end of the NATO bombing it will do the regime no harm to suggest - even through such wild allegations - that Yugoslavia and its heroic leader himself remain under direct threat from the West.

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