

Bid to Capture Karadzic Fails

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NATO-led peacekeepers fail in first official attempt to arrest leading Hague indictee.

A massive NATO-led military operation in eastern Bosnia Thursday has failed to capture top war crimes suspect, Radovan Karadzic.

The SFOR action, the first officially confirmed attempt to capture the Bosnian Serb war-time leader, suggests that the alliance is intensifying efforts to apprehend Hague indictees in Bosnia.

While this will be welcomed by those who feel the alliance has been slow to bring war crimes suspects to justice, it may strain relations between the international community and the Bosnian Serb leadership.

Republika Srpska, RS, premier Mladen Ivanic heavily criticised NATO for not informing him of the action and for the use of what he described as excessive force.

"I think it is unacceptable that such activities are taking place without anybody in Republika Srpska knowing anything about it," he said.

He added that RS could not be expected to cooperate with The Hague while the international community was unwilling to cooperate with the entity.

Bosnia's local leaders are charged with tracking down and arresting local war crimes suspects, but post-war RS officials have resisted this.

They've been either reluctant or slow to cooperate with The Hague, or have flatly refused to do so and have done their utmost to block the process.

According to local and international sources, in Sarajevo and Banja Luka, the operation started early Thursday morning in the vicinity of the villages of Celebici and Jecmista, close to Foca and the border with Montenegro. The area - more than 40 square km - was almost completely sealed off by SFOR. Electricity and phone lines were reportedly cut off.

A large number of SFOR soldiers and at least a dozen helicopters were involved in the action, in which peacekeepers raided a number of homes and other buildings.

Local media reported that loud explosions and gun fire was heard, and Bosnian Serb officials complained that a church, school and local hospital were blockaded, during the action.

Ivanic said SFOR raided around 70 buildings in the area and used explosives to enter 18 of them. He said nobody was injured or arrested in the operation.

Some Western sources said there may have been casualties on the Serb side, but it was unclear whether

they were among civilians or bodyguards believed to be protecting Karadzic.

NATO sources, who confirmed that the SFOR troops had failed to capture Karadzic, said the operation was mounted following receipt of information that Karadzic was hiding in the area.

According to an alliance statement, significant quantities of weapons were found in a compound near Celebici during the action.

The move, though unsuccessful, is extremely significant. It's the first official attempt to arrest Karadzic. Over the past few years, local and international media have speculated from time to time that such actions were taking place. These reports were, however, never confirmed by NATO.

Thursday's operation indicates the alliance's readiness to increase pressure on Hague indictees still at large in Bosnia.

At a meeting on December 12 last year, NATO ambassadors announced that the peacekeeping force would step up efforts to hunt down top war-crimes suspects. This was reiterated five days later, at a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels.

Since July 1997, SFOR has captured 23 indicted war criminals - three of them were killed during the arrest attempts.

Seizures dropped in 2001, prompting some to suggest that peacekeepers were scaling down their work or even preparing to withdraw from Bosnia.

Janez Kovac is a pseudonym of the regular IWPR contributor.

Location: Bosnia and Herzegovina

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