

Bosnian War Crimes Investigation Stalls

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Doboj residents are losing hope of seeing justice done.

Early last month, when the Zenica Cantonal Court launched an investigation into war crimes committed in the Bosnian Serb town of Doboj between 1992-1994, many former residents hoped they might finally see some justice for what befell them in the early years of the war.

Like most of the non-Serb population in what was then Serb-held territory, they were forced from their homes and expelled. Hundreds were reportedly killed by firing squads in the nearby military barracks and on the banks of the river Bosna.

But shortly after the investigation began, it was beset by difficulties over questions of jurisdiction, apprehension of the accused - and allegations that at least one prominent suspect was not being investigated because he is holding high political office in Bosnia.

Eventually - in a move that does not bode well for Bosnia's ability to try war crimes in the future - the investigation stalled and was passed on to a higher court, which will decide whether or not to proceed.

The drama began several years ago when an investigative judge in Zenica began looking into the activities of the Bosnian Serb leadership in Doboj during the war.

After conducting a preliminary investigation, the Bosnian judiciary requested permission from the United Nations war crimes tribunal to launch a formal investigation, in accordance with the "Rules of the Road" - a policy introduced by the former United States envoy to Bosnia, Richard Holbrooke. The tribunal issued a green light for Bosnian authorities to proceed in 1999.

In June this year, the Zenica court began formal hearings into the activities of four Bosnian Serb officials suspected of genocide and war crimes against non-Serb civilians in Doboj - Nikola Jorgic, a former policeman; Milovan Stankovic, the former Bosnian Serb military commander for the town and surrounding region; Milan "Mico" Ninkovic, formerly chairman of the local branch of the Serb Democratic Party, SDS, as well being as a former Bosnian Serb defence minister, and Andrija Bjelosevic, the one-time head of the Doboj Security Centre.

Among the incidents under investigation are: the execution of 15 civilians from the Spreca Central Prison in Doboj in May 1992; a series of mass executions of non-Serbs on the banks of the river Bosna on June 17-19, 1992; a series of mass executions in the "July 4th" military barracks in the village of Miljkovac on July 12, 1992; and the use of civilians as human shields against a Bosnian Army advance the same month.

The first complication in the case arose when the public began demanding why the former president of the Bosnian Serb crisis staff headquarters in Doboj was not being investigated.

It was a serious question, because the man who held that position - Borislav Paravac - is the Serb member of Bosnia-Herzegovina's tripartite presidency. He was elected when the previous Serb member, Mirko Sarovic, resigned over the "Orao" affair in which a Bosnian Serb company was accused of selling arms to Iraq.

Many Bosnians - particularly those who had been expelled from the area - claimed that the crisis staff headquarters in Doboj helped carry out the ethnic cleansing of the town.

The second complication arose when it was pointed out that one of the men under investigation - the policeman Jorgic - had already been sentenced to life in prison at a trial conducted in Germany in 1997. That technicality was overcome when the court announced that, if it was shown that Jorgic was sentenced for the same crimes for which he is now being investigated, the proceedings against him would be dropped.

Of the remaining three suspects under investigation, only one has agreed to cooperate.

Former security service head Bjelosevic arrived at the Zenica court on June 2. He claimed that he had never received a summons, and only found out about the investigation through the media.

"I have come here of my own free will to defend myself," he told the judges. "I promise full cooperation with the court concerning the physical evidence of this case and I have no doubt that I will prove my innocence."

Bjelosevic was subsequently released on bail.

Stankovic, the military commander, is believed to be living in Serbia - but the court has no idea where, and was not able to inform him of the investigation.

Ninkovic, the former Bosnian Serb defence minister, was supposed to give a deposition but failed to show up in court in spite of a summons requiring him to do so. His lawyers, Danilo Stijovic and Goran Neskovic (who is part of Momcilo Krajisnik's legal team in the Hague), told the judge that their client had gone to Belgrade to receive medical treatment for heart problems, and requested a new hearing date in two weeks time.

A fortnight later, on June 20, Ninkovic again failed to show up for the hearing. This time his lawyers filed a complaint claiming that the court did not have territorial jurisdiction over crimes committed in Doboj, but that Ninkovic would answer to a higher court's investigation.

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