

Brammertz Suspects Operation Storm Documents "Hidden"

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Chief prosecutor said he doubts authorities' claim that they have been lost.

The Hague tribunal's chief prosecutor has said he believes that key documents related to Operation Storm which his office has demanded from the Croatian authorities have been intentionally removed or hidden.

"We have been seeking those important documents for more than 18 months. I mentioned this to the Croatian authorities in all our meetings, and we had to request a binding order that was issued by the trial chamber," said Serge Brammertz, in an interview with Croatian daily Vecernji List on January 3.

"It seems to us very unlikely that key documents related to a major military operation might simply disappear. We have reason to believe that some people have intentionally removed or hidden those documents."

The documents in question relate to the activities of Croatia's artillery and special police forces during the military operation held to regain control over Serb-held territories in Croatia.

Prosecutors believe the documents could help them support their case against three Croatian army generals – Ante Gotovina, Ivan Cermak and Mladen Markac – currently standing trial at the Hague tribunal for crimes committed against Serb civilians during Operation Storm. Their trial started in March last year and is still in the prosecution phase.

Hundreds of Serb citizens died and thousands fled their homes during this operation which began on August 4, 1995, and ended with the dissolution of the self-proclaimed Republic of Serb Krajina.

In June last year, Brammertz asked judges to issue the order against the Croatian authorities, compelling them to hand over evidence from their state archives.

However, on June 17, Deputy Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor told reporters that although Croatia was "sincerely and fully" cooperating with the tribunal, it couldn't surrender the documents in question because it didn't have them.

"Of the 788 requests, the government has partly failed to meet only one that concerns documents we cannot find," said Kosor. "Several internal investigations have been carried out, the commissions are working, but for now there have been no results."

Following Brammertz's interview last week, Croatian government's spokesperson, Zlatko Mehun rejected the prosecutor's statements.

"The Croatian government has been fully co-operating with the Hague tribunal. All relevant documents that the government had in its possession have been sent to The Hague, and those that didn't exist couldn't be handed over," Mehun told Croatian media this week.

A reporter with Rijeka-based daily Novi List, Denis Romac, who regularly covers war crimes trials at the Hague tribunal, said it is strange that the trial of three generals could even start without these documents, especially if they are as important as the chief prosecutor claims.

“This suggests that the prosecutors haven’t succeeded in obtaining enough evidence against Gotovina, Cermak and Markac before the trial started, even though the former chief prosecutor Carla Del Ponte claimed otherwise,” Romac told IWPR.

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