

## **Croatian Extremist Threat**

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There are fears Croatia could be torn by the kind of politically motivated violence now almost routine in neighbouring Yugoslavia.

A faxed death threat arrived at the offices of Croatian President Stipe Mesic two weeks ago, just one day after Milan Levar, a high profile Hague witness, was killed in a bomb blast in his garden.

The fax was sent by the Croatian Revolutionary Fraternity, CRF, who said they would kill Mesic with an explosive device. "Imagine that, they sentence me to death, effective immediately, with no right to appeal," the president said disdainfully.

Like Levar, Mesic testified to the Hague war crimes tribunal two years ago, provoking bitter attacks from right-wing politicians. Mesic is a strong advocate of prosecutions against suspected war criminals and has criticised the Zagreb government for failing to clamp-down on nationalist extremists.

In condemning Levar's murder, Mesic said Prime Minister Ivica Racan's six-party coalition government must shoulder much of the blame for his death due to its softly-softly approach to the far-right.

Earlier this year, Racan halted an investigation into the desecration of a memorial to the victims of the Ustashe, Croatia's World War Two fascists. His government failed to respond to the erection of a statue in honour of Ustashe commander Jura Francetic.

Racan also chose to ignore calls for a coup by Vukovar extremists. And has done little to stem frequent threats directed at Serbs in the area.

Levar was killed by an explosive device planted in a gas cylinder outside his home in Gospic. He had spoken to tribunal investigators about atrocities committed against Serb residents in the town in 1991. He had also given several interviews to the Croatian media in which he accused prominent military and political figures, including some in Racan's government, of organising or covering up the crimes.

At least 120 civilians, the vast majority Serb, were killed in Gospic. Levar claimed generals Tihomir Oreskovic and Mirko Norac, both commanders of the town's defence forces at the time, were responsible.

Levar also claimed Drazen Budisa, leader of the Croatian Social Liberal Party, Racan's main coalition partner, and Zdravko Tomac, the present vice-president of Racan's Social Democrat Party, knew of the killings. Relatives of those murdered had approached the two politicians directly for help, Levar said. Budisa and Tomac were members of Tudjman's government of national unity at the time.

Levar had served as a special forces commander during the Croatian war, a fact which made it all the more difficult for those implicated to rubbish his allegations.

The scale of the bloodshed in Gospic made a cover-up extremely difficult. News of the crimes soon filtered out, coinciding with Croatia's push for international recognition. Resultant pressure from the United States and Germany forced Tudjman to act. Norac was relieved of his command and Oreskovic arrested.

But the prompt intervention of Tudjman's influential Defence Minister Gojko Susak soon secured Oreskovic's release. Susak claimed action against Norac and Oreskovic could lead to rebellion within the Croatian Army. Both were later promoted to the rank of general.

Levar's death has come at a very sensitive moment in Croatia. The government's move towards greater co-operation with the Hague Tribunal has provoked an hysterical protest campaign by the Croatian far-right and senior army officers, who see the move as the "criminalisation" of Croatia's "Patriotic War".

One right-wing political leader, President of the New Croatian Right party Mladen Schwartz said, "My party has received the news of Levar's murder with pleasure and relief. We salute our patriotic soldiers in Gospic for that courageous act."

The CRF was thought to have disbanded in 1991 when Croatia achieved independence. The group was made up of nationalist extremists from the émigré community and had been active in the 1960s and 1970s. The Communist government in former Yugoslavia condemned the group as "terrorists".

The Mesic death threat would suggest the extreme right is only just beginning its campaign of violence. Some analysts fear Croatia may soon be racked by the politically motivated violence which has become almost routine in neighbouring Yugoslavia.

Racan has responded by announcing a more concerted fight against political violence and intimidation . The majority of the public appear to support such a policy. A poll in the Zagreb daily, Vecernji List, indicated that 63 per cent of Croatians support a crackdown on extreme nationalists. Nearly 52 per cent believe Croats should be prosecuted for war crimes (29 per cent against), while 70.9 per cent support co-operation with the Hague tribunal.

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