

Del Ponte in Belgrade

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Hague tribunal prosecutor Carla Del Ponte storms out of meeting with President Kostunica

The war crimes tribunal's chief prosecutor, Carla Del Ponte, abruptly ended her hour-long talks with Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica yesterday, January 23, after he reportedly refused to extradite his predecessor to The Hague.

Kostunica is said to have delivered well-rehearsed objections to the tribunal process during his meeting with Del Ponte.

The Yugoslav president reportedly told the war crimes prosecutor that he considered her court anti-Serbian and politically manipulated by the United States. He also apparently cited a clause of the Yugoslav constitution prohibiting the extradition of citizens, to counter demands for Milosevic's extradition.

After storming out of her meeting with Kostunica, Del Ponte refused to speak to the media.

She is now due to meet other top Yugoslav officials, including Federal Justice Minister Momcilo Grubac, Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic and Federal Police Minister Zoran Zivkovic.

Del Ponte had come to Belgrade to lobby for the extradition of Milosevic and to try to persuade the Yugoslav authorities to adopt a more cooperative approach to the tribunal.

Although Kostunica's stance was known ahead of his meeting with the prosecutor, senior sources within the Yugoslav army told IWPR that the president had put Milosevic under house arrest before Del Ponte's arrival, in what appeared to be a conciliatory gesture to the tribunal.

The sources claim Milosevic has been moved from his luxury home at 33 Tolstoy street, in the posh Belgrade suburb of Dedinje, down the road to No. 4, a villa owned by the army's counter intelligence services. He is under 24-hour guard by elite Yugoslav troops.

Kostunica, the sources claim, informed Milosevic of the move during their controversial meeting ten days ago.

Serbia's new interior minister, Dusan Mihajlovic, said the public had a right to know Milosevic's whereabouts at all times given the former president had a tribunal warrant for his arrest and was under investigation in Yugoslavia for corruption and abuse of power.

The president's refusal to meet tribunal demands was applauded throughout Serbia last night, especially by Milosevic's party, the Socialist Party of Serbia. Yugoslavs are opposed to the extradition of their former leader because they regard the tribunal as anti-Serb. They would prefer to see him tried in Belgrade for crimes against the Serbian people.

Belgrade's new authorities reflect the popular mood. They agree that Milosevic should not be sent to The

Hague, but their consensus then breaks down.

One camp argues he should be tried only for corruption and crimes against the Serbian people. The other asserts he should be tried for war crimes, but in Belgrade.

Meanwhile, the international community has set March 31 as the deadline for Milosevic's extradition to The Hague. Should Belgrade fail to comply, it faces being deprived of foreign financial aid, essential to the country's reconstruction and economic recovery.

Momcilo Grubac had lobbied for cooperation with the tribunal and had called for the government to come up with a common position ahead of Del Ponte's visit. No such united line emerged.

Federal Foreign Minister Goran Svilanovic advocated that Milosevic be tried by the tribunal in Belgrade.

"It is possible that Milosevic will be brought before the Yugoslav courts in cooperation with The Hague," he said. This so far is the furthest the Belgrade leadership is prepared to go to accommodate The Hague court.

Svilanovic's comments provoked a sharp response from Federal Prime Minister Zoran Zizic - until recently a Milosevic ally and a staunch opponent of the tribunal. "We shall only cooperate with The Hague to exchange material evidence, but will aim to preserve national dignity and state interest," he said.

The opening of a tribunal office in Belgrade "does not automatically mean the acceptance of all its requests," Zizic added.

The United States Senator Joseph Biden, on meeting Kostunica earlier this month, had suggested the Yugoslav president was moving towards a compromise position, which could see Milosevic on trial before a tribunal court in Belgrade.

The conflicting views among Serbia's top politicians explain Del Ponte's decision to meet several leading figures during her visit.

Sources close to Kostunica claim he initially refused to meet Del Ponte because she had specifically ruled out the possibility of Milosevic being tried anywhere other than The Hague. It was the pressure from his coalition partners which forced Kostunica to change his mind.

Kostunica's coalition partner and rival, Djindjic seized on the president's initial refusal to meet Del Ponte as an opportunity to appear more pragmatic, saying he would meet the chief prosecutor instead.

Del Ponte is to meet Djindjic today but he is no more likely to support Milosevic's extradition than his rival. The prime minister faces a practical problem. The former president's appearance at The Hague would almost inevitably lead to the extradition of several top military and police officials.

Many of these officials, especially within the police, played a crucial role in Milosevic's downfall on October 5 and are now very close to Djindjic.

In an interview in the Belgrade magazine NIN in December, Djindjic said he "was pretty sure a majority" of the senior police officials who helped him in October are on The Hague's list of indictees. "But I would rather withdraw from politics than extradite them to The Hague," he said.

Del Ponte had announced prior to her visit that as a sign of good will she would inform Kostunica of the identity of up to five out of an unknown number of Yugoslav citizens named in sealed tribunal indictments.

When their talks failed, The Hague prosecutor refrained from handing the envelope to the president, which he had vowed to make public. She has instead signalled that it may end up in hands of the federal minister of justice.

Besides the Milosevic question, Del Ponte has several other matters she plans to discuss with Serbian officials, the results of which should be made public during her press conference on Thursday.

Five top Yugoslav officials were indicted along with Milosevic in May 1999. There is also the question of the so-called "Vukovar Three", Yugoslav army officers indicted for crimes in Croatia in 1991. And of course there are the 17 indicted Bosnian Serb officials the tribunal suspects are hiding in Serbia.

Many observers in Belgrade believe extradition of the "Vukovar Three", namely Veselin Slijivancanin, Mile Mrksic, and Miroslav Radic, could be Del Ponte's first request. This may provide an opportunity for Serbian politicians to demonstrate their commitment to cooperation with the tribunal.

What's clear however is that the Serbian authorities need more time to consolidate their power and to bring a divided public around to accepting that cooperation with the war crimes tribunal is inevitable.

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