

Former Police General Postpones Entering Plea

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Vlastimir Djordjevic says he needs more time to consider charges in his indictment.

At his initial appearance at the Hague tribunal this week, former Serbian police general Vlastimir Djordjevic decided to postpone entering his plea, because he has yet to choose defense counsel to represent him in court and to consult him on the charges in the indictment.

Djordjevic, 58, is indicted for crimes against humanity and war crimes committed against Kosovo Albanians in 1999. He was one of five remaining tribunal fugitives before he was arrested on June 17 in the Montenegrin coastal town of Budva.

He had been on the run for more than three years.

According to the Hague tribunal, his arrest came as a result of the cooperation between the court's Office of the Prosecutor, OTP, Montenegrin and Serbian authorities.

The OTP earlier claimed Djordjevic was hiding in Russia and asked Serbia to put pressure on Moscow to facilitate his arrest and extradition.

The local media reported that Djordjevic was living in Budva for the last couple of months under an assumed name and worked at a construction site of this booming coastal resort.

They also claim that Djordjevic had grown long hair and beard, which made him almost unrecognisable.

As deputy interior minister and police commander during the Kosovo conflict, Djordjevic was loyal to former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, who died in March 2006 while on trial at the tribunal.

The indictment alleges that Djordjevic participated in a joint criminal enterprise whose aim was to expel the majority of the Kosovo Albanian population from Kosovo to ensure continued Serbian control over the territory.

According to the charges, this was to be achieved by a widespread or systematic campaign of murder, deportations and persecution directed at the Kosovo Albanians.

The indictment alleges that Djordjevic was a member of the Joint Command of Yugoslav and Serbian armed forces that deported some 800,000 Albanians from Kosovo, killed over 700 named Kosovo Albanians, sexually assaulted many women, and looted and destroyed civilian property. He is alleged to have had effective command of the Serbian police operating in Kosovo.

Prosecutors have yet to decide whether they'll apply for the joinder of Djordjevic's case with the case of six other high-ranking Serbian officials, whose trial began in July last year.

Djordjevic was originally indicted in October 2003, together with Yugoslav army generals Nebojša Pavković and Vladimir Lazarević and Serbian police general Sreten Lukić. Their case has been joined with that against former Serbian president Milan Milutinović, Yugoslav army chief of staff Dragoljub Ojdanić and Yugoslav deputy prime minister Nikola Šainović.

The prosecution is currently weighing the arguments for and against the joinder, but one of the main problems is that they have already completed the presentation of their evidence against the six accused in May this year. The defence is expected to start with its case-in-chief in August.

Prosecutors have indicated that they will announce their decision on whether to apply for a joinder at the pre-defence conference this summer.

Djordjevic, who appeared to be in good shape at his initial appearance this week, told the court he had no health problems and that he didn't have any objections to the conditions of his detention.

"Everything is as it should be and in accordance with the rules," he said.

Djordjevic has to enter his plea on the counts in the indictment within the next 30 days.

Earlier this month, another war crimes suspect, former Bosnian Serb general Zdravko Tolimir, was delivered to the Hague tribunal to face genocide charges.

Djordjevic's arrest, which came only two weeks after Tolimir was captured, means that of a total of 161 persons indicted by the tribunal since 1993, only four persons remain on the run, including two most wanted - ex-Bosnian Serb army chief Ratko Mladić and former Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadžić.

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