

Karadzic "Associate" Still Being Questioned

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A week after detaining him, SFOR continue to interrogate Milovan Bjelica in connection with his alleged links to Hague indictee's support network.

A businessman suspected of links to indicted war crimes fugitive Radovan Karadzic is still being questioned by SFOR specialists eager to trace the former Bosnian Serb president.

Milovan "Cicko" Bjelica has been held in a secret location since he was detained by the NATO-led peacekeepers on May 14 in the town of Sokolac, some 30 kilometres east of the capital Sarajevo.

SFOR spokesperson Captain Robert Lapreze told the media that Bjelica, a former mayor of Pale who is described as a close Karadzic associate, was being questioned about his alleged part in a network providing financial support to indicted war crimes suspects.

SFOR hopes that the detention and interrogation of Bjelica will bring them a few steps closer to capturing Karadzic, one of the Hague tribunal's most wanted indictees.

Speaking on the Bosnian current affairs television programme 60 Minutes the day after the suspect was taken in for questioning, SFOR General Virgil Packer said, "We would not have detained [Bjelica] if we had not considered that important for achievement of our aims."

He added that SFOR would not hesitate to talk to those suspected of having ties with indicted war crimes suspects, adding that they were determined to find out who was involved with the alleged network or was supplying any kind of service to Hague fugitives.

An SFOR source confirmed this week that Bjelica was being held in a secure location and that he was still being questioned, although no charges have been brought. "We can't say how long he will be in detention, as obviously any answers he gives will have to be thoroughly investigated," he said.

"It wouldn't be appropriate for me to speculate at this stage whether he will be released without charge, or if he will be handed over to the authorities for criminal prosecution."

The international community has argued that since Karadzic supporters' alleged provision of financial assistance has enabled the indictee to escape extradition to The Hague, they are in breach of the 1995 Dayton Agreement that ended the war in Bosnia.

These grounds were cited on March 7, 2003, when High Representative Lord Ashdown personally sacked Bjelica from his post of mayor of Pale, Karadzic's wartime stronghold.

Bjelica vigorously denied the charges. "The accusations against me are ridiculous - there is nothing which links me to any violation of the Dayton Agreement," he told the press at the time.

"I have had no contact with Karadzic since the beginning of 1998. I don't know where he is, nor do I know

anyone who has been in contact with him since then.”

However, the Office of High Representative also ordered that Bjelica’s assets and bank accounts be frozen and he was later declared persona non grata by the European Union and the United States, both of whom issued travel bans against him.

SFOR has brought a number of people in for questioning in recent months in an attempt to step up the hunt for Karadzic and other fugitives.

The NATO-led stabilisation force is coming under increasing pressure to capture Karadzic, who has been on the run since he was indicted by The Hague after the war ended in 1995.

A series of high-profile attempts to track him down have ended in failure, most recently a raid on the Bosnian Serb leader’s wartime stronghold Pale, which resulted in the serious injury of a local priest and his son.

The international community is slowly running out of patience with the Bosnian Serb entity Republika Srpska, which is yet to arrest a single Hague suspect on its territory. Of the suspects apprehended and handed over to the tribunal so far, all have been arrested by SFOR.

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