

Karadzic Gathering Angers Survivors

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Supporters of former Bosnian Serb president send message that "he is not forgotten".

A rally in Banja Luka this week to honour former Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadzic, currently on trial for war crimes at the Hague tribunal, has been condemned by relatives of victims.

Some 200 Karadzic supporters gathered in the Republika Srpska, RS, capital on November 22 to celebrate the feast day of Karadzic's patron saint. Celebrating such feast days is an old Serb tradition known as krsna slava.

Staged by the Serb nationalist movement The Choice Is Ours, organisers claimed that their aim was to "show Karadzic that he has not been forgotten and that he enjoys our full support".

Karadzic, the first president of Republika Srpska and supreme commander of the RS armed forces, has been charged with 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including the massacre of almost 8,000 Bosniak men and boys at Srebrenica in July 1995.

The indictment alleges that Karadzic was responsible for crimes of persecution, extermination, murder and forcible transfer which "contributed to achieving the objective of the permanent removal of Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats from Bosnian Serb-claimed territory".

Prosecutors also accuse him of orchestrating the 44-month campaign of sniping and shelling of the city of Sarajevo, which resulted in nearly 12,000 civilian deaths.

After years as a fugitive, Karadzic was arrested in Belgrade on July 21, 2008. His trial started in October 2009 and should resume in March next year.

The president of The Choice Is Ours, Dane Cankovic, said at the gathering in Krajina square that the "Serb people must never forget their heroes and martyrs such as Radovan Karadzic who stood up in the defence of his people".

Cankovic went on to say that "with his wisdom and truth, Karadzic will show the whole world what actually happened in the recent war, thus removing the black shadow cast onto the Serb people".

War crimes survivors were angered by the Banja Luka event, which they saw as a provocation.

Bakira Hasecic, the chairwoman of the Women War Victims Association in Sarajevo, which includes women raped and sexually harassed during the 1992-1995 war, condemned the activities of The Choice Is Ours.

"Fifteen years on, we the victims are supposed to understand that nothing has changed in RS," she said.

Zumra Mehic, a housewife from Srebrenica who lost her husband and four sons in the Srebrenica massacre, told IWPR, "What else could I think, except that it is a deliberate provocation, a humiliation and mocking of the very same victims that have lost their loved ones?"

"Many members of my family are not alive anymore. Those who organised the event should be ashamed of Karadzic, rather than celebrate him."

Mehic now lives alone in Kladanj in temporary accommodation, having never returned to her pre-war residence. She has buried three of her sons and her husband; the remains of the fourth were found and identified, and his burial is planned for July 11, 2010, at the Potocari Memorial Complex, on the fifteenth anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide.

Sarajevo pensioner Emina Omerovic, who lost her 23-year-old only son to Serb sniper fire from Trebevic mountain near Sarajevo, told IWPR that she was extremely disturbed by the gathering in Banja Luka.

"I think that those who organised and those who attended the event should be ashamed," she said, adding that "all such associations and events should be banned by law".

But the chairman of the Banja Luka-based Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in RS, Branko Todorovic, told IWPR that while the gathering in Banja Luka was disturbing, it was not a cause for serious concern.

"It would have been even more alarming if the number [of people who attended] 20,000, or if an official institution of Republika Srpska or Bosnia and Hercegovina had supported such an event," he said. "That would require serious attention."

Events held by fringe groups and individual protestors, he said, were just intended to attract media attention.

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