

Knin Investigation Sparks Protests

Author: [Sanja Vukcevic](#)

Croat nationalists rally in protest against Hague investigation into suspected mass grave in Knin

War veterans and invalids gathered earlier this week in central Knin - formerly the "capital" of the short-lived Croatian Serb breakaway region of Krajina - to protest over the work of Hague tribunal investigators in the town's main cemetery.

The protestors hoped to block the work of Hague forensic experts who arrived last week to begin the exhumation of around 250 people believed to have been killed during the Croatian army's reconquest of the area in August 1995.

An estimated 200,000 Serbs fled the Krajina region following the Croatian military campaign, known as "Operation Storm".

The Zagreb government has approved the Hague investigation and representatives from the judiciary have accompanied the tribunal team.

Right-wing nationalists claim the tribunal inquiry threatens the country's independence. The Croatian Party of Rights said the investigators were "digging up ghosts... in a demonstration of force by the international community and The Hague".

But fear of new Hague indictments also lurks behind the protests. Establishing the identities of the victims and the circumstances of their deaths will almost certainly result in further tribunal charges.

Disabled war veteran Colonel Mirko Condic told the protestors the Croatian people and the army have nothing to hide, "There are no mass graves here. Those are individual graves of the victims of war, buried according to international conventions."

The proximity of Croatia's local elections - scheduled for May 20 - almost guarantees further confrontation, violence and possibly an escalation of inter-ethnic tensions.

But Monday's protest in Knin attracted only 300 people, seemingly far fewer than the organisers anticipated. Police outnumbered the demonstrators, surrounding them in the town-square and lining the road to the cemetery.

When the protesters attempted to march to the cemetery they were dispersed peacefully.

Sources at The Hague suggest the graves not only contain the bodies of those killed in fighting six years ago, but the remains of Serb civilians who did not leave the area along with majority of the Serb population.

Reports from non-government and international organisations indicate many of those who stayed behind were elderly or infirm, and that sporadic killings in surrounding villages continued for months after the

military operation was completed.

Croatian police have secured the cemetery and local Serbs have been gathering each day eager for news about missing relatives - and are hopeful they will at last be able to bury their dead in a dignified manner.

Today, Knin is home to nearly 10,000 Serbs. But around 10,000 Croats from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo have moved to the area in recent years and been housed in the empty apartments of Serbs who fled in 1995. Hardline Croat nationalist factions are vociferous in their support of the immigrants.

The exact number of people killed during "Operation Storm" is not known. In early August 1995, over the space of a few days, the Croatian army swept across the predominantly-Serb area, which had been governed for four years by a para-government in Knin.

Reports from the United Nations Mission in Knin in August 1995 supported suspicions Croat forces were committing war crimes. Data from August 15 of that year - ten days after "Operation Storm" began - showed 56 new crosses in the Knin cemetery. On August 16, there were at least 96.

The Croatian representative from the department for detained and missing persons, Colonel Ivan Grujic, who held the same post under the Tudjman government, resolutely denies any war crimes were committed.

Retired general, Ivan Cermak, military commander in the Knin area, claims 94 soldiers and two civilians were buried in the 96 graves mentioned by the UN team. Cermak has been mentioned in the Croatian media as a possible future Hague indictee.

The Croatian Helsinki Committee has information on 318 victims believed buried in the cemetery. The organisation has also voiced suspicion that several corpses were put in existing graves in an effort to cover up the true number of casualties.

"The exact number of those buried will be known only after The Hague investigators complete their work," said Ivo Vukelja, investigative judge from the Sibenik district court. "That could take weeks."

The exhumed remains will probably be examined at the Zagreb Institute for Forensic Medicine and should confirm the identities of the victims and cause of death. New Hague indictments are likely to follow.

Besides Cermak, other military and police commanders of units active in the northern Dalmatian area have been mentioned as possible indictees, especially Damir Krsticevic, a retired Croatian army general, MP Mladen Markac, former commander of the Croatian police special units, and Smiljan Reljic, one-time intelligence chief.

Mention has also been made of other, smaller graves in cemeteries in Sibenik, Zadar and Gracac. Another previously unknown site has turned up in Biskupija village near Knin. It is not yet known if Hague investigators plan to exhume remains from these sites too.

Sanja Vukcevic is a journalist with the Split independent agency STINA.

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