

Kosovo Atrocity Cover-up

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There's more and more evidence of a concerted campaign to destroy the remains of Kosovo Albanians butchered by Milosevic's forces.

Serbia is being haunted by horrifying tales of atrocities committed in the Kosovo conflict two years ago. The stories tell of wholesale burning of Albanian bodies to destroy evidence of widespread massacres.

The most spectacular revelation to date was a story in a local magazine in eastern Serbia, the *Timocka Criminal Review*, about a freezer lorry containing some 50 corpses, discovered beneath the waters of the Danube at Kladovo, in eastern Serbia.

The lorry was pulled out of the river on April 6, 1999, but the Milosevic regime kept the whole thing hushed up.

The paper said the corpses appeared to have come from Kosovo. Similar tales are now coming to light showing that Serbs waged a systematic campaign to destroy the bodies of Kosovo Albanians they had massacred.

Serbia's new regime and judiciary are uncertain how they should deal with this Milosevic-era legacy. Serbs who witnessed the crimes fear they will be condemned by their compatriots or persecuted by the killers if they tried to give testimony.

The news of the freezer lorry affair spread like wildfire as the public had never been allowed to learn about Serb atrocities. Every section of the media made the story headline news.

Some media attempted to investigate the case further, with limited success. Radio B92 interviewed the man who gave *Timocka* its exclusive, Zivojin Djordjevic, a diver who found the freezer in 1999. They also spoke to Milivoj Srzentic, the new district prosecutor in Negotin, where the lorry was found.

"It was a Mercedes lorry - the name of the meat processing company from Pec was written in Albanian on the cabin," Djordjevic told the radio station, confirming the *Timocka* story.

"The license plates were from Pec. A huge stone had been placed on the accelerator pedal to send the truck plunging into the water.

"When the lorry was pulled out and the doors of the freezer opened, corpses started sliding out. There were many bodies of women, children and old people. Some women had Turkish trousers, some children and old people were naked."

The then Serbian interior ministry pronounced the affair a state secret and blocked all investigation. Srzentic said he had asked the prosecutor at the time, Krsta Majstorovic, why no investigation was going on. Majstorovic answered, "Because nothing has happened".

The next day on April 7, 1999, the corpses were taken by a freezer lorry with Belgrade number plates to the police training compound in Petrovo Selo where it was destroyed with 30 kilograms of explosives.

The prosecution office of The Hague tribunal is conducting its own investigation according to Jim Langdale, spokesman for the court's registry and chambers department.

The director of the Belgrade-based Humanitarian Law Centre, Natasa Kandic, swiftly condemned the affair as a heinous crime. The people in the freezer lorry may well be on the list of between 1,300 and 2,000 Albanians missing since the Kosovo conflict.

"The Serbian government must launch an investigation into facts surrounding the removal of evidence," said Kandic.

She said there were serious indications that the Serbian police and army worked to destroy the evidence of atrocities committed against Kosovo Albanians during the NATO bombardment.

According to Kandic's information, during the period between March 24 to June 12, 1999, at least 800 bodies of murdered Albanians, including old people, women and children, were transported from their initial burial sites to secret locations in Kosovo and Serbia. The corpses were either burned or reburied.

On the night of May 17 that year, 87 murdered Kosovo Albanians were removed from their graves in Djakovica cemetery. In addition, Kandic says, the bodies of around 130 men executed in Izbica village were taken from their mass grave and transported to an unknown location.

Similar claims, not yet revealed to the Serbian public, were made in a documentary programme broadcast on the American public radio station ARW on January 25 this year.

The documentary alleged that Serbian special forces, acting on orders of "a close Milosevic ally", burnt about 1,500 murdered Kosovo Albanian civilians in the blast furnace of Trepca complex during the spring of 1999.

"The aim was to destroy the remains of those killed as if they had never existed," an ex-member of Serbian special forces, calling himself only Dusko, told the programme. "Whole villages were destroyed and their inhabitants killed."

According to the testimony of Branko, a driver of one of the lorries which took the remains to Trepca, around 120 corpses of women and children came from Izbica alone. The bodies were taken first to the mills normally used for grinding minerals and then fed by conveyor belt into the furnace.

"It was a horrifying scene," said Branko. "The conveyor belt was similar to any other factory, only it was moving corpses."

The two ARW interviewees are not prepared to testify at The Hague tribunal. A senior Western official, who wished to stay anonymous, told IWPR that the court has evidence that Serbs removed all evidence of mass burning from the Trepca mine in Kosovo. But, he added, "those who know about it do not wish to come forward and testify".

How is the new government dealing with this flood of accusations?

The Yugoslav army has launched an investigation into the conduct of 245 soldiers. Charges for crimes committed between March 1, 1998, to June 26, 1999, were brought against 183 soldiers. IWPR found out those charges are related neither to the Trepca mine nor to the lorry freezer from Pec.

Details of the judicial proceedings are not yet known, neither is the identity of those accused. Some people doubt the trials will ever happen, and believe the public will be fobbed off by vague reports that measures are being taken.

The new regime's officials and members of the judiciary had been expected to comment on the freezer lorry affair. Serbia's justice minister, Vladan Batic, and police minister, Dusan Mihajlovic, both declined to say anything.

Federal police minister Zoran Zivkovic said on May 7 during a B92 radio programme that the matter is outside his jurisdiction. Eventually, the Serbian interior ministry announced that a special police unit was formed on May 7 to investigate the case. Details of the unit were not disclosed.

But so far witnesses are remaining silent, like Marko, a 20-year-old barman in Kragujevac, central Serbia. Between 1998 and 1999, he served in a regular Yugoslav army unit in Kosovo manning the Kosare watch tower on the Albanian border.

"We were protecting our border from Albanian terrorists - unfortunately there were those who vented their anger on innocent civilians," he said.

Marko's friend from the same unit, enraged by the death of his friend, killed an Albanian woman by throwing her into a well along with a grenade.

Marko, like the majority of those who served in Kosovo, thinks Serbia is not yet ready for public debate over these crimes. "I am afraid because I neither trust the judiciary nor the honesty of the current government," he said.

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