

Kostunica Spurns Del Ponte

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War crimes chief prosecutor Carla Del Ponte leaves Belgrade empty-handed

Hague chief prosecutor Carla Del Ponte left Belgrade last week with an

important question unanswered: is Serbia ready to start cooperating with the

Hague court?

The impression given last week was that it isn't prepared to do so.

Del Ponte was clearly frustrated by President Kostunica's refusal to

extradite Slobodan Milosevic or any other war crimes suspects in the near

future. "I was somewhat disappointed, " the prosecutor said, rather

diplomatically.

But there are some encouraging signs.

By agreeing to hold talks with Del Ponte, Belgrade leaders have de facto

recognised the tribunal - something they've previously refused to do. And

while Kostunica and Serbian prime minister Zoran Djindjic are opposed to

doing much else, some of their colleagues have signaled their readiness to

be more cooperative.

Just as importantly, the chief prosecutor's presence in Belgrade has forced

ordinary people to face up to Milosevic's bloody legacy - the former

authorities had long insisted that Serbs bore no responsibility for war crimes.

But these breakthroughs clearly fell short of Del Ponte's demands.

In an interview with IWPR, she admits that she had not been hopeful of delivering the former president to The Hague.

Del Ponte said she had expected Milosevic to be detained soon after the October 5 revolution. She had watched the drama unfold on TV while on a visit to Macedonia.

"I was certain that the transitional administration would arrest Milosevic," she said. "Everything seemed to be leading to it."

When it didn't, she put her faith in the new government. But since it was elected in December, no progress has been made.

Kostunica's recent meeting with Milosevic to discuss "political developments" was the last straw for her. Del Ponte felt any hope of the authorities dealing resolutely and decisively disappeared overnight. "This is why I felt it was important to come to Belgrade now," she said.

Del Ponte clearly got nowhere with Kostunica. "I simply had to listen for half an hour to what I already knew," she said of her meeting with the

Yugoslav president. "I wanted a dialogue...but he wanted to make a political statement."

She was, however, encouraged by her talks with other senior reformist leaders who, she said, expressed more of a willingness to work with her."

Other meetings were completely positive," said the prosecutor.

Although they appear just as unwilling as Kostunica to send Milosevic to The Hague, some of the senior officials she met have hinted that they might agree to him being put on trial for war crimes in Belgrade.

Del Ponte says this is "out of the question", but the very fact that they are prepared to consider prosecuting Milosevic for war crimes represents progress.

This willingness to make some compromises stems from a fear that the international community may impose sanctions or deny financial aid unless there's more cooperation.

Ordinary Serbs too are beginning realise that there's a lot at stake - they are now acknowledging that the tribunal is a serious institution with real power, not the joke the former regime had portrayed it as.

And in an effort to try to win over the public, Del Ponte did her best to

dispel the still widely held view that the tribunal is anti-Serb. "I want

the people of Serbia to rest assured that we are also investigating crimes

committed against the Serbs in Kosovo, Croatia and Bosnia," she said.

Del Ponte also sought to rally support for the prosecution of Milosevic. She claimed that he knew Serbian state television would be bombed during NATO air raids but did nothing to protect its staff. Sixteen people working in the building were killed when the building was hit.

The new Serbia must get rid of its war crimes suspects - whether Kostunica

and Djindjic understand this is another question.

They have to realise that unless they cooperate with the tribunal, Serbia risks international isolation all over again.

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