

Lord Owen Says Milosevic Failed to Cut Bosnian Links

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Former negotiator says Slobodan Milosevic could have starved the Bosnian Serb war machine, but chose not to.

Former Balkan peace mediator Lord David Owen this week praised Slobodan Milosevic for his role in peace negotiations over Bosnia, but went on to blame him for continuing to supply the Bosnian Serb military.

Lord Owen is remembered for the May 1993 peace plan for Bosnia that was accepted by the Serbian president – but was then wrecked when it was rejected by the Bosnian Serbs.

The 65-year-old former British foreign secretary, who became the European Union's mediator in September 1992, said he had turned down a prosecution request to appear for their case, preferring to be summoned by the judges because, as a former negotiator, he must maintain neutrality.

In the course of his two days giving evidence, he praised Milosevic for supporting the peace plan he put together with United Nations mediator Cyrus Vance.

But he said that when the Bosnian Serbs rejected the plan, Milosevic refused to cut supplies of oil and weapons across the border, a move which could have crippled the Bosnian Serb war machine.

"He was in charge of a government that could put real, serious pressure on them to stop them doing what they were doing, to stop shelling Sarajevo, to stop ethnic cleansing," Owen told the court. "If President Milosevic had gone to Pale [the then Bosnian Serb capital] and told them 'if you did not agree on this there will be no supplies, you will be completely cut off,' they would have signed up to the Vance-Owen plan."

"I would still maintain that he had power to make a settlement," he added.

Milosevic refused to cut the links, he said, and it was two years before another peace plan – America's Dayton agreement – finally ended the war.

In an emotional moment, the former negotiator then turned to Milosevic and said, "I'm asking you, why did you fail to use your power to cut the supplies off?"

But he said the West was also to blame because it refused to back his peace plan by threatening air strikes on Bosnian Serb supply lines, "The pressure could have come from President Milosevic of Serbia, but it also should have come from the West."

Lord Owen, who became the European Union's mediator in September 1992, said the West must examine its conscience over Srebrenica, because when the UN Security Council set up the UN Safe Area around the town, it refused to provide the troops everyone knew were needed.

He described the Safe Area plan as "a disgraceful decision", saying, "Every single member of the Security Council knew they would not provide sufficient troops. We did not provide those troops, and we are in part

responsible for that appalling massacre.”

Lord Owen portrayed the former president – facing genocide charges for the slaughter of Muslims in Bosnia – as a pragmatic politician rather than a racist.

“Milosevic is not fundamentally racist. He is a nationalist, but even that he wears very lightly,” he said. “He’s a pragmatist who wanted Serbs to be in the majority. I don’t think he was an ethnic purist.”

Prosecutor Geoffrey Nice asked him, “Do you accept that the accused was someone capable of telling untruths and misleading people when it suited him?”

“There was a certain amount of knowing lying,” replied Lord Owen. “It was not quite the same as a straight lie. I just want to qualify the word. Lie is a rather savage word.”

Lord Owen has been heavily criticised in the past for his peace plan, which many saw as rewarding the Serbs’ genocide by giving them control of parts of Bosnia.

The Vance-Owen plan came into being in the spring of 1993. The ethnic cleansing of the previous summer had left the Bosnian Serbs holding two thirds of the country, but front lines had solidified as the Bosnian government army grew stronger.

Milosevic, keen to shake off international sanctions, supported the peace plan. At a conference in Athens in May that year, Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadzic also gave it his blessing.

But a few days later, the Bosnian Serb parliament, meeting in Pale, rejected the plan, to the annoyance of Milosevic who had turned up to support it.

“What I wish you had done was made your verbal support for peace into the economic and military pressures,” Lord Owen said. “The missing piece is that you used these powers of persuasion in the negotiation character, but when you could not persuade, you stopped there.”

As Prosecutor Geoffrey Nice navigated through the evidence, he is likely to be pleased with the confirmation that Milosevic was feeding the Bosnian Serb war machine and could have stopped it in its tracks by cutting off supplies. This evidence is likely to be seen as supporting the idea that Milosevic had responsibility for war crimes in Bosnia.

Lord Owen said that in the early days, Milosevic’s word was law with the Bosnian Serb leadership, especially Karadzic. But once their parliament had rejected the Vance Owen plan in May 1993, the Bosnian Serbs began to ignore Milosevic, he said.

He condemned Bosnian Serb war crimes and rejected the assertion that all sides were equally to blame for the horrors of the Bosnian war, “There is a danger in trying to be fair, in trying to determine that all are equally at fault.

“The Bosnian Serbs were responsible for many more cases of mistreatment, malnutrition, killing, raping – a whole range of issues. That is a situation you [Milosevic] have to face up to. There was no impartial

observer who did not come to the conclusion that the Bosnian Serbs were offending more.”

While Lord Owen appeared often supportive of Milosevic, even warm towards him, he was more critical of Bosnian Serb leaders, saying of the former army General Ratko Mladic, “There was a callousness and a brutality about the man.”

He also spoke of the exasperation he experienced with the complexities of the Bosnian war: at one point, when Milosevic did limit oil deliveries to the Bosnian Serbs, they instead got their oil from the then Croatian president Franjo Tudjman, despite the fact that tens of thousands of ethnic Croats had been ethnically cleansed and Catholic churches dynamited.

“Here was President Milosevic applying sanctions on the Bosnian Serbs... and then one encounters President Tudjman sending supplies of oil to the Bosnian Serbs,” said Lord Owen. “They have no idea of the extraordinary circumstances in which we were operating, UN resolutions and agreements that were contradictory.”

If Hague watchers had expected confrontation during the cross-examination, what they got instead was a polite exchange between Lord Owen and Milosevic.

But Judge Richard May stopped Milosevic several times, once by ordering his microphone to be cut off in mid-sentence, saying he was making statements rather than asking questions. This followed Milosevic’s reading of lengthy accounts by other protagonists involved in the Bosnian war, with no question attached to the end of the monologues.

“Mere propaganda on your side is not going to help us,” said Judge May.

“I’m not engaged in propaganda,” said Milosevic. “What I’m doing is to speak about the facts.”

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