

Montenegro: Trafficking Probe Furore

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Opposition challenge report dismissing claims that officials trafficked and abused Moldovan woman.

A government report on the sex-trafficking scandal that rocked Montenegro two years ago, exonerating the accused officials, has met widespread suspicion among the opposition who have complained of a whitewash.

The report, compiled by a government commission, said police chiefs had fabricated claims that government officials took part in the trafficking and sexual abuse of a Moldovan woman, known only by her initials SC.

The report, which was published earlier this month, did not delve into any motives for the alleged conspiracy. However, the prime minister, Milo Djukanovic, who along with senior officials was mentioned as an alleged actor in the scandal, earlier insisted the aim of the story was to drive him from office.

The scandal broke in November 2002 when four suspects, including the deputy state prosecutor, Zoran Pipervic, were arrested on suspicion of forcing a Moldovan woman into prostitution.

When SC then testified in front of a judge, she named other prominent political and public figures among her clients, or people she had come into contact with.

When Djukanovic's name appeared as an alleged participant in an orgy in a five-star hotel, the premier issued a statement to the investigating judge rebutting the allegations and describing them as part of a conspiracy against himself and Montenegro.

Owing to lack of evidence, charges against the suspects were never pressed. The decision to drop them, however, was made by a prosecutor who was also mentioned by the Moldovan woman in her testimony as an acquaintance.

All the suspects were released from custody, while the woman left the country to an unknown destination through the mediation of the International Organisation for Migration, IOM, the inter-governmental body set up to help governments manage migration problems humanely.

This development attracted criticism, among others, from the OSCE and the Council of Europe, whose experts said the police and judicial authorities had committed a number of legal blunders.

In a report that several of these experts published a year ago, the prosecutor who'd dismissed the case was accused of bias, owing to the fact that the Moldovan woman had mentioned top-ranking members of the same prosecutor's office in her testimony.

OSCE and Council of Europe experts urged the government to set up an independent commission to investigate the conduct of the police, secret police and judiciary in the affair.

In the event, the government commission, formed a year ago, concluded that former interior minister Andrija Jovicevic, an ex- Djukanovic ally, and the current assistant interior minister, Mico Orlandic, had spearheaded an anti-Djukanovic campaign.

Corroborating Djukanovic's claim that he was the victim of a conspiracy, the report said the Moldovan woman effectively testified under instruction.

It said Jovicevic masterminded the plot to boost his career with the aid of Orlandic, former anti-trafficking squad chief Milan Paunovic and the director of a women's refuge that took SC in, Ljiljana Raicevic. They had acted with the support of unnamed forces in the international community, the report added.

The commission said Paunovic and Raicevic in particular had tutored the Moldovan woman in a fabricated testimony.

Jovicevic, Paunovic and Raicevic all reject the commission's findings.

Maurizio Massari, head of the OSCE mission in Serbia and Montenegro, said he was disappointed with the report.

In particular, the organisation was not happy with either the contents or the tone of the section accusing the international community of allegedly using the police as its instrument, Massari said.

The accused Montenegrin government officials, on the other hand, including Piperovic, have hailed the findings as vindication of their sullied reputations.

Orlandic has been given permission by the government to comment on the claims made in the report, but has not said anything yet.

Nikola Bulatovic, a representative of the Free Lawyers Association, an NGO close to the opposition, told IWPR he believed that the government may have bought Orlandic's silence by guaranteeing that he will not have to face charges.

As long as this government is in place, this case will not be solved, Bulatovic said.

Opposition supporters are adamant that the report's main purpose was to ensure there were no further legal investigations into the sex-trafficking affair.

The outcome showed Montenegro had fallen completely into the hands of the secret services, controlled by Djukanovic, the deputy leader of the Popular Party, Predrag Popovic, said.

Raicevic said the report was constructed simply to protect Djukanovic's name and reputation.

The premier has declined to comment further on the case.

The government's secretary general, Zarko Sturanovic, said opposition complaints of a cover-up were unfounded.

On the contrary, the government did everything to clarify the case completely in accordance with the law and the international community's suggestions, Sturanovic told IWPR.

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