

Oric Hague Demo

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Case of Srebrenica commander is one of the most controversial to come before The Hague.

Irony was as heavy as rain this weekend as 200 Bosnian demonstrators gathered outside the war crimes court to protest the arrest of former Srebrenica commander Nasir Oric.

Oric was arrested in April by NATO troops and is in The Hague, charged with violations of the laws of customs of war.

A small delegation went inside the court building on April 26 to present letters to the prosecutors asking for the case to be reconsidered.

But outside, questions were asked: Oric is charged with responsibility for the deaths in custody of seven Serbs and the torture of several more.

The torture was especially cruel - in one case his men are accused of pulling a prisoner's teeth out with pliers.

Yet the crimes seemed small to the demonstrators - compared to the slaughter of 7,000 unarmed Muslims by Serb soldiers. Most of those soldiers are free. Oric is in jail.

And the UN itself, which promised to defend Srebrenica, has escaped without penalty when it changed its mind and handed the town to Bosnian Serb forces.

In July 1995, a Dutch battalion defending the enclave asked for air support. The UN refused, the Dutch surrendered and handed over the population to Bosnian Serb commander Ratko Mladic who executed at least 7,000.

"The Dutch have never found the responsible commanders," said Sali Pasalic, one of the delegation leaders. "They will try with 20 commissions to investigate the problem. But the worst thing that can happen to anyone from the Dutch command found responsible is to be transferred to another highly paid job."

Inside the court building, Pasalic and the delegates, one wearing a white teeshirt with Oric's picture on the front, presented letters to tribunal spokesman Jim Landale.

They told him they were upset that he had been arrested, "He was ready to come without any resistance," said one delegate.

"We think that Nasir Oric is the only man who tried to defend the people from the Chetniks," said Pasalic. "He was very successful in this. He was more successful than the Dutch battalion and the United Nations."

This is the second demonstration in three weeks. It was orderly - just two Dutch policemen were on duty. But it is also a reminder that this is one of the most controversial cases to come before The Hague tribunal.

The Oric indictment comes with the prosecutors publicly committed to indicting only high-level war crimes suspects - with those accused of smaller numbers of killings left to the jurisdiction of regional courts.

Critics are likely to accuse prosecutors of indicting Oric because so few Bosnian Muslims have appeared at The Hague charged with war crimes.

Prosecutors are likely to reject this argument, but the controversy, and the demonstrations, will go on.

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