

Plavsic Rejects 'Safe House'

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Former Bosnian Serb president Biljana Plavsic turns down Dutch "safe house" offer.

In a surprise move last week, Biljana Plavsic turned down a Dutch government offer of a "safe house" in The Hague, opting instead to remain in the United Nations Detention Unit at Scheveningen.

On January 19, tribunal president Judge Claude Jorda agreed to Plavsic's request, but ordered some modifications to her accommodation at Scheveningen.

Plavsic, the only woman among 34 men held in the UN facility, had originally requested "safe detention" elsewhere.

Her lawyer, Krstan Simic, from Banja Luka, said her change of heart had come about during a closed hearing on the defendant's conditions of detention.

One of the problems facing the tribunal had been the cost of finding alternative secure accommodation for the defendant. Previously the Dutch government had charged 200,000 Dutch guilders per month for "safe house services".

At the closed hearing, however, the Dutch representatives said accommodation for Plavsic would be offered free of charge because of the exceptional circumstances involved - the defendant being female who formerly held a high-ranking post.

The representatives stressed this did not imply similar offers would be made to other accused former heads of state should they come to The Hague.

According to Simic, Plavsic had decided the "safe house" option would have resulted in "total isolation". Also, he said, the Dutch police security regime was "much more rigorous than the UN regime in the detention unit."

General Tihomir Blaskic, the former Bosnian Croat military commander now serving 45 years for his crimes, spent over a year in a Dutch "safe house" in 1996 and 1997 - the costs had been covered by the Croatian government.

During this time, Blaskic's freedom of movement was extremely limited. He was banned from the villa balcony and wasn't allowed to shut the toilet door when he was relieving himself.

In the end, he was desperate to return to the UN facility. Detainees at Scheveningen knew of Blaskic's experiences and may have contributed to Plavsic's change of heart.

Simic said the defence's suggestion of "safe detention" in Republika Srpska had not "met with the understanding of the judge and the prosecutor." He added that Plavsic had already "adapted to conditions" in the UN detention unit and had "established contacts with other detainees".

"She went for a walk together with them," Simic said, "and no longer objected to being surrounded by men."

The detention unit has four floors with 12 cells on each. Plavsic shares a floor with Dario Kordic and Mario Cerkez, accused of crimes in central Bosnia, Goran Jelusic, accused of crimes in Brcko, Milorad Krnojelac, the former warden of Foca prison, and Dragoljub Prcac, former deputy commander of the Omarska prison camp.

Jorda said the section of the prison housing Plavsic would in future be "exclusively used for female detainees", implying there could be other women indictees. An all-woman security force is to guard this new "female wing".

Plavsic has also been granted the chance to use the recreation facilities and library "in the absence of male detainees". The accused would only be able to meet other detainees "on request", Jorda ruled.

Finally, Plavsic is to be provided with a double cell. According to Simic, the dividing wall between two cells is to be removed providing Plavsic with a bedroom and a study "where she will be able to prepare her defence".

Perhaps the "Plavsic precedent" will be cited in the future by other former government leaders or heads of state who find themselves guests of the tribunal detention unit.

Location: Bosnia and Herzegovina

Focus: International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia

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