

REGIONAL REPORT:

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There's growing speculation in Macedonia that the country's controversial interior minister will soon end up in The Hague.

Macedonia: Tribunal Probes Ljuboten Massacre

The interior minister, Ljube Boskovski, may become the first Macedonian to be prosecuted by the the war crimes tribunal. Local media have been speculating that The Hague could soon indict Boskovski for the killings of ten Albanian civilians in Ljuboten during last year's conflict.

Villagers allege that the victims were killed by Macedonian forces under the direct orders of Boskovski, who was in Ljuboten on the day of the crime, August 12, 2001. Television footage leaves the interior minister's presence in the village in no doubt.

Tribunal representatives visited Skopje's public prosecutor last month to announce they would be opening their investigation into the atrocity by the beginning of April. They have been assured they will receive the full cooperation of the authorities.

Hague representatives will also be launching a separate investigation into the disappearance of 12 Macedonians near the western city of Tetovo. Local police believe that they were killed and buried by members of the ethnic Albanian National Liberation Army, NLA.

And there could be more tribunal inquiries. Macedonia's public prosecutor Stavre Dzikov confirmed that he had met with tribunal representative Howard Tucker and handed over all the evidence pointing to war crimes committed during the conflict. "It was a huge package," said Dzikov.

The Skopje-based daily Dnevnik carried a report on March 12 which suggested a written agreement had been reached between the authorities and Tucker, giving the green light for an investigation into the Ljuboten massacre.

News of the tribunal's activities has sparked some controversy among Macedonia's more nationalist leaning politicians. Independent deputy Ljupco Anusev interrupted proceedings in parliament on March 6 to call for a ban to be put on tribunal employees digging up ground in Ljuboten. "If Macedonia is a real state then it must stop these foreigners carrying out these exhumations without any permit," said Anusev.

His remarks were picked up by the pro-government television channel Sitel. A news report on March 7 claimed that exhumations were being carried out by former members of the NLA along with NATO soldiers and OSCE monitors. The report also claimed that its journalists had been forbidden access to Ljuboten.

Locals in Ljuboten denied these claims. "Minister Boskovski and his journalists are lying," villager Beki Aslani told IWPR. "There have been no exhumations and there have been no armed people here."

Aslani said that Boskovski has used the same excuse of an NLA presence when the army attacked the village. Many here believe it was carried out as a means of revenge for the deaths of eight Macedonians and that there had been no NLA presence at all.

The Macedonian president's national security advisor Stevo Pendarovski confirmed that the investigation was currently only in its preliminary stage. "Tribunal representatives have only started to interview local villagers," said Pendarovski.

Most of the Macedonian media seem to be resigned to the fact that Boskovski will end up in The Hague. Not only is he generally considered to be the country's most radical and militant politician but much of the evidence points towards his participation in the killings. After all, he was in Ljuboten the day of the massacre, and was in charge of Macedonian forces.

Footage taken by Macedonian National Television on the day of the atrocity clearly shows Boskovski standing on a balcony in the northern outskirts of the village surrounded by several armed policemen. According to the television report, the minister was present "during the entire operation".

Now, the Macedonian Helsinki Committee say they have firm evidence that Boskovski personally led the attack in which the ten victims were killed.

When Boskovski was last year presented with the allegations that he was directly responsible for the massacre, he told the daily Nova Makedonija, "For Macedonia, I'm ready to go to The Hague."

However, his confidence is flagging. Last Sunday, during a visit to Tetovo it seemed that he was not all that keen on making the trip to The Hague after all. "I recognise only the judgment of those who elected me and they are the Macedonian citizens," he said, defiantly.

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