

Regional Report: Belgrade to Fund Hague Suspects

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Plan to aid families of suspected war criminals angers human rights and victims' groups.

A scheme by the government of Serbia and Montenegro to help the families of war crimes suspects held in The Hague has enraged human rights groups and victim support organisations.

Under the plan, put forward by Serbia and Montenegro's Council of Ministers on May 29, people who surrender to the tribunal voluntarily will get an annual allowance of 10,000 euro.

Suspects themselves will get a monthly stipend of 200 euro while in detention, and the remaining 7,600 euro will go towards travel expenses so that three members of each family can visit them every second month until the trials are complete.

The government clearly thought it was acting to facilitate cooperation with the tribunal, and no doubt also wanted to appease nationalist sentiments which remain opposed to the Hague process.

"I strongly support this decision, because I think we must do everything in order to meet our obligations to The Hague," said Serbia and Montenegro foreign minister Goran Svilanovic.

Rasim Ljajic, minister for minorities of Serbia and Montenegro, said that although many in the government were critical of the plan, ministers had ultimately voted for it because they knew it would play well with the electorate.

"The decision was not unanimous. Various opinions were expressed," he said. "But if the government had not agreed to it, it would have risked alienating the majority of Serbia's population which is still against cooperation with The Hague."

For many outside the government the announcement came as a shock, at a time when the country seemed to be finally acting to redress the wrongs committed in its name.

Several judges were critical of the decision, saying it was time the government made up its mind whether the perpetrators of war crimes were criminals or heroes.

While human rights groups are pleased that Belgrade wants to cooperate with the tribunal, news of the deal infuriated them. Together with victim support groups and some of the judiciary, they alleged that the authorities were assisting those who may be responsible for war crimes while ignoring the victims.

"Instead of working to reveal the identity of those who perpetrated and ordered the crimes, and instead of providing compensation to the victims, the state has decided to reward those indicted by the international court," said a statement issued by the Humanitarian Law Centre in Belgrade. "The Council of Ministers decision is an assault on the dignity of the victims of the war crimes committed on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, and on their families."

The law centre, which been supportive of official efforts to cooperate with the tribunal, demanded that the decision be revoked because it was tantamount to the state protecting those guilty of the “most severe crimes against humanity.”

Some of the most vocal criticism came from those representing family members of Muslims who were abducted in 1992-93 from the villages of Sjeverin and Strpce in the Sandzak region of south-west Serbia. The families have been searching for their loved ones ever since, and have received no assistance from the state.

Velija Muric, who is head of the Montenegrin Legal Committee for the Protection of Human Rights and has been representing the families of the disappeared in Sandzak, said the aid scheme was tantamount to “government collaboration in war crimes.”

“This decision can only have negative effects because it will discourage all democratic efforts for reconciliation among the peoples of former Yugoslavia,” she said.

Several other non-government organisations in Montenegro expressed outrage. At an emergency meeting they issued a joint statement demanding compensation for the families of the Sandzak victims, “These people should be fairly compensated for their losses... They deserve the greatest respect from the state, and the government should them show it. The state has provided no assistance to victims of armed conflicts.”

Women in Black, a well-known women’s group which staged anti-war demonstrations throughout the 1990s, said that while it understood the government’s motives, it was wrong to ask the public to foot the bill to cover the needs of war crimes suspects. It called on the government not only to reverse the decision, but to set up a fund to compensate the victims of war.

“Wouldn’t it be more rational, courageous and just if the government set up a special fund that by selling off all the property that war profiteers obtained illegally, and using it to help the victims and their families?” said Stasa Zajevec, the head of Women in Black.

Mirko Tepavac, a member of the Forum for International Relations, an advocacy group trying to ease Serbia’s path towards European Union accession, described the compensation scheme as “shameful” - and also unnecessary.

“The government did this without there being any obvious need. No one was calling for it,” he said. “It’s just a way for them to win over a few more votes - and it’s wrong.”

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