

Regional Report: Bosnian Fury at Oric Arrest

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Many Bosnian Muslims see the indicted commander as a national hero.

The arrest of Naser Oric, former Srebrenica commander, continues to cause controversy weeks after it took place.

Oric was grabbed by plain clothes men in Tuzla, northern Bosnia, in early April and has now been charged with war crimes by Hague prosecutors.

But in Bosnia, the incident has provoked real anger - particularly over the decision of SFOR to arrest him by force, rather than invite him to surrender. The official reason is that there was a fear he might run away. But conspiracy theories abound.

Newspapers this week said his arrest came only days after a group of masked men tried to kill him - leading NATO to worry that unless they arrested him fast, someone else might attempt an assassination.

Hakija Meholic, one of Srebrenica's wartime commanders, spoke of the attempt to murder Oric. The former said the latter had told him that someone had blocked a road near his summerhouse in Kladanj with a heap of stones, and that once he got out of his car to move them, he came under fire.

NATO is saying little, except that Oric did not resist arrest.

Others suggest he was arrested by hired gunmen, rather than commandos - a theory that is popular because he was bundled into a civilian van by four men dressed in plain clothes. The only outward sign of SFOR involvement was the sight of a US-made Apache helicopter hovering overhead.

Passions are running high following the arrest, as Oric was a hero for many of the Srebrenica survivors.

"Shameful. They arrested him just a few days after we buried 600 murdered Srebrenica residents!" protested Sabra Kolenovic, from the Association of Mother of the Srebrenica and Zepa Enclaves. "Oric is not a war criminal, but a man who defended his own people."

One of the wartime army commanders in Srebrenica, Zulfo Tursunovic said, "Naser's army did not kill women and children, which is why he is not a war criminal, but a national hero."

Head of the Srebrenica Municipal Council Sadik Ahmetovic described the arrest as the height of cynicism. It was unnecessary because Oric said that he would voluntarily surrender, said Ahmetovic, an opinion expressed by many.

Sulejman Tihic, SDA leader and member of the Bosnia-Herzegovina presidency, said that Oric would prove his innocence." The truth is that he had defended the unarmed people in Srebrenica from the aggressors who wanted to destroy them," he said.

Another complaint often heard is that Oric's crimes - the killing of seven Serbs - are far less than offences committed by thousands of former Serb soldiers, none of whom have been indicted.

The mood and the atmosphere was quite the opposite amongst Serbs in Bratunac, near Srebrenica. They welcomed Oric's arrest, saying that they are now starting to believe in justice and in the tribunal.

Jovan Nikolic, a Serb from Bratunac, says that he had witnessed crimes by Muslim forces in the village of Kravica, "I cannot say that Oric was personally involved, but they were committed by the army under his command. This is why his arrest comes as relief to many local Serbs."

Perica Vasovic, head of the association of war invalids in Bratunac, said, "Naser's departure to The Hague proves that justice will reach everyone. With this happening we are beginning to believe a bit more that The Hague is not biased, that it is not arresting only Serbs, but all those suspected of committing crimes."

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