

REGIONAL REPORT: Bosnia's Brave Face on Generals' Arrest

Author: [Amra Kebo](#)

Sarajevo fully cooperated with the transfer of the first Bosnian army officers to The Hague, but it remains anxious over what may emerge in their trials.

In the early hours of August 2, Mehmed Alagic received his knock on the door.

Four policemen had come to his house in Sanski Most. They explained to Alagic, a retired Bosnian army general, that he was the subject of a sealed indictment issued by The Hague tribunal. He did not resist arrest. But when instructed to bring along his medication, Alagic, a diabetic, said he would rather "die en route to Sarajevo".

On the same day, around 7 am, Enver Hadzihasanovic, another retired Bosnian army general, also had a visit at his house in Kakanj, and was arrested. Amir Kubura, a former commander of the 7th brigade, interrupted his vacation and turned himself in to the federal police.

This is the first time that Bosnian army officers will appear before The Hague tribunal. They are charged with war crimes against Croats and the Serbs in central Bosnia. The alleged crimes were committed by foreign volunteers - including Islamic fighters known as Mujahidin, as well as members of the 7th Muslim Mountain Brigade. The three Bosnian army officers were transported from the Butmir SFOR base near Sarajevo by helicopter to the US SFOR base in Tuzla, and arrived in The Hague the next day.

Their arrest is of immense importance for Bosnia-Herzegovina. It will trigger widespread discussion over the role of former Bosnian president Alija Izetbegovic. The 7th Muslim Brigade was viewed by many as his personal guard unit. As the three officers are all facing charges of war crimes on the basis of their command responsibility, the trial will throw a spotlight on Izetbegovic's relationship with his commanders.

The act of handing over the Bosniak commanders is proof of the authorities' willingness to cooperate with the tribunal. Their manner of transfer was also notable - unlike most indictees from Croatia, Bosnia and especially Republika Sprska, travelling directly, upon arrest, to the court. The widespread support for the three indicates that they will be seen by many as heroes rather than alleged war criminals.

All three military officials were indicted for crimes allegedly committed in central Bosnia between January 1993 and January 1994, while the Muslim-led Bosnian army fought against the Croat Defence Council, known as the HVO. The Bosniak officers are charged with violations of laws and customs of war; and grave breaches of the Geneva conventions, including murder, inhumane treatment, illegal detentions in prison camps, robbery and destruction of property owned by Bosnian Croats and Serbs.

The defendants were all top commanders of the Bosnian army 3rd corps, or one of its components, the 7th Muslim Mountain Brigade. The brigade included many foreign Muslim fighters, the Mujahidin, who had begun arriving in Bosnia-Herzegovina during mid-1992. The Hague trials will present an opportunity to shed light on this period. Many Mujahideen endeavoured to introduce a strong Islamic element into the multi-ethnic Bosnian army, together with the idea of 'jihad' or Islamic holy war, often with little success.

The sealed indictments reached the Bosnian foreign ministry last week. Apart from officials there, no one was informed of their contents, not even General Atif Dudakovic, Joint Chief of Staffs of the Federation Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The indictments were forwarded by foreign minister Zlatko Lagumdžija to the justice and interior ministries, and then to the federation Supreme Court. The court then issued arrest warrants and orders for the detention of the alleged war criminals, before their hand-over to The Hague tribunal on the basis of the 1996 federal Law on Extradition of Indictees.

Zvonko Mijan, federation justice minister, said the manner in which the sealed indictments were delivered to the Bosnian officials is unprecedented. It was a sign of the court's faith in the country's legal framework and its "adherence to its policy of absolute co-operation with The Hague tribunal."

The arrests triggered protests by the War Veterans' Union as well as condemnation from Izetbegovic's Democratic Action Party, SDA. The SDA blamed the arrest on "political pressure on the tribunal's Office of the Prosecutor to indict some Bosnian Muslims on the basis of command responsibility".

The news of Alagic's arrest triggered anger among the people of Sanski Most. He was regarded by local residents as a war hero, and a legendary freedom fighter. Earlier this year, a court sentenced him to four and half years imprisonment after he was found guilty of abuse of power and misappropriation of funds while serving as president of the Sanski Most municipality, a ruling which he has appealed.

Many of Alagic's fellow soldiers swore on their honour that he could not be classed as a war criminal. They said that the 3rd corps was the best military unit in the Bosnian army. In protest against his arrest, the walls of Sanski Most were quickly covered by posters of him. A meeting attended by about 15,000 people was organised in the town's centre by the War Veterans Union, demobilised fighters and family members.

Lagumdzija has said several times that it would be indecent to compare Hadzihasanovic, Alagic and Kubura with Bosnian Serbs indicted for war crimes, such as Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic.

"We shall stand by these people until it is proved beyond reasonable doubt that they are guilty as charged," he said. "We should help them in any possible way to prove their innocence. This is why the lawyers, the federal government and the state institutions have made it quite clear that all the facts, documents, everything which some people may regard as state secrets are not state secrets for those people who want to defend themselves because they defended this state".

"They have acted with dignity," said Muhamed Besic, federal interior minister, commenting on their arrest, "just like they acted when they were defending this country, like true commanders and heroes".

Such a unified front may come under strain, however, as any evidence about crimes by the former president's elite troops emerges.

Amra Kebo is IWPR assistant editor in Bosnia, and an editor with the Sarajevo daily Oslobodjenje.

Location: [Croatia](#)
[Bosnia and](#)
[Herzegovina](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/regional-report-bosnias-brave-face-generals>