

REGIONAL REPORT: Croatian Serb Scapegoats

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The authorities in Croatia are arresting innocent Serbs to diffuse nationalist anger over the detention of Croat war crimes suspects.

"When I told them I was not that Stevo Borjanic, that it was a mere coincidence that I had the same name, they just shrugged their shoulders and pushed me into a cell," said Stevo Borjanic, a Croatian Serb from Beli Manastir in Baranja.

Newspapers informed readers that Borjanic was a war criminal, published his full name and local radio repeated several times that Baranja citizens could sleep peacefully now that another war criminal was behind bars. Baranja is an area in northern Croatia controlled by Serbs during the 1991-95 conflict.

Borjanic was arrested in February 2000 on war crimes charges. He was dumped in Osijek prison where he languished for a year and a half before the mistaken identity was recognised. He was among five persons freed on evidence from a female witness who confirmed that the detained man was not the Stevo Borjanic wanted for war crimes.

Borjanic is just one of many accused who have learned the hard way just how easy it is to fall foul of Croatia's inadequate war crimes procedures. Critics accuse the government of rushing to make spurious arrests of Croatian Serbs to head off nationalist backlash whenever it is compelled to arrest an ethnic Croatian war-crimes suspect.

Eighteen Serbs named in various lists and currently in a Croat prison on war crimes charges have gone on hunger strike to highlight their plight. They claim to be innocent and say their arrests were a heavy-handed attempt by the Croatian government to compensate for the arrest of Gen. Mirko Norac and several other Croatian army officers last spring.

Yugoslav president Vojislav Kostunica, speaking in response to the hunger strike, said Zagreb was in serious breach of the men's human rights.

"Whenever the right wing goes crazy in Croatia, the Croatian government immediately starts arresting Serbs," said a Serb politician from Podunavlje, an area in eastern Croatia controlled by Serb rebels until early 1998. "This happened after the arrest of Tihomir Oreskovic, an officer of the Croat army accused of committing war crimes against Serbs in Gospić in 1991, and especially after the arrest of Gen. Norac, accused of the same crime. It doesn't matter whether there is any evidence for the arrests or not."

A defence lawyer from Osijek says that only efforts to "strike a balance between arrests" can explain why "on the day that the Norac trial began in Rijeka on June 25, six out of the eighteen Serbs on hunger strike were tried in Osijek.

"The media mocked their hunger strike by claiming that the prisoners were being fed in the prison canteen. But when the trial started only four of the six inmates appeared. The other two were in the prison hospital in Zagreb suffering from exhaustion. And the four who did appear were not well either. They had lost 10 kilos."

Stevan Dobos, a member of the defence team, says the defendants are "puppets" not war criminals.

"Unable to catch the real ones, those who emigrated from Croatia, the government is now arresting people who have nothing to do with war crimes," he said.

Milorad Pupovac, president of the Serbian People's Council, a moderate intellectual from Zagreb, caused outrage by claiming the Croat government was conducting a covert ethnic-cleansing campaign. He said the ease with which "war criminal lists" were being compiled, the resultant arrest and imprisonment of "suspects" and the flawed trial procedures were scaring Croatian Serbs into leaving their homes.

Vojislav Stanimirovic, president of the Independent Democratic Serbian Party, agrees. "When you arrest an innocent person for such a serious crime as a war crime - an offence punished under Croatian law with a prison sentence of 20 years - it's a clear sign to other innocent people that they too could be arrested," Stanimirovic warns.

In January 1995, the Zagreb authorities ordered the arrest of 112 Serbs from the Baranja area on the basis of vague witness statements. A slightly more detailed investigation led to the withdrawal of 26 of the warrants and exposed the poor and irresponsible nature of Croatian war crimes' investigations in general.

The list of 112 was then reduced to 58 after further enquiries revealed people had been unjustly accused of crimes. Several such lists of Serb war crimes suspects are in existence from different areas of Croatia. Six of the 58 Baranja accused are currently in Osijek prison. Others now live in Yugoslavia.

Despite the Zagreb government's more liberal stance towards Croatian Serbs returning to their former homes, their position on alleged Serb war criminals is no different to that of the ousted, ultra-nationalist Croatian Democratic Union government of late president Franjo Tudjman.

The government remains exposed to the influence of right-wing politicians. As a result, when even mention is made of a Croat being arrested for war crimes, Serb "suspects" are rounded up to diffuse a potential backlash from nationalist extremists.

As one Serb politician put it rather cynically, "Now we can see that us Serbs have a use in Croatia after all."

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