

Regional Report: Hague Steps Up Pressure on Mladic

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Are cracks beginning to appear in the wall protecting Ratko Mladic?

You'll need a microscope to see them, but tiny cracks have appeared in the wall of Yugoslavia's defiance over the handing-over of key war crimes suspect Ratko Mladic.

Mladic, the former Bosnian Serb army commander accused of the massacre of 7,000 Muslims at Srebrenica, shares the top position in The Hague's Most Wanted list alongside former Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadzic.

Both men have been on the run since 1996, but they enjoy very different lifestyles.

While Karadzic moves from cottage to ditch to wood trying to stay one step ahead of NATO commandos in Bosnia, Mladic is wined and dined in style in Belgrade, protected by the Yugoslav army.

But the pressure is now on. Hague chief prosecutor Carla Del Ponte last week made her second visit to Belgrade in a month to demand Mladic's hand over.

And this time, she was joined by UN Secretary General Kofi Anan - a reminder that UN sanctions may be around the corner unless Belgrade cooperates with the tribunal.

After meeting with Del Ponte, army chief of staff General Branko Krga issued a statement distancing the army, VJ, from Mladic.

"The VJ is not competent to arrest persons that are not in its ranks," the statement said. In other words, if the police arrest Mladic, it is no business of the VJ to interfere.

Sources say Del Ponte met not just with General Krga but also the army's security department, General Aco Tomic, who told her point blank that the federal forces were not hiding Mladic.

This denial is seen as a small breach in the army's intransigence: having stated this position, it will be hard for the generals to do anything to protect Mladic if he is tracked down.

And there was another encouraging step before the Del Ponte visit, when Yugoslav president Vojislav Kostunica - the commander in chief of federal forces - promised not to bring down the government of his bitter rival, Serbian prime minister Zoran Djindjic, within the next six months.

This together with the army statement means that, in theory at least, Djindjic could use Serbian police to seize Mladic, without worrying too much about the political repercussions.

Not that Del Ponte believes that Mladic will be handed over to The Hague anytime soon.

“Neither the army nor the police are doing anything to arrest him. He is overly protected,” Del Ponte told journalists in front of Belgrade office of the tribunal. “There is no political will to arrest him.”

Mladic was a career officer in the Yugoslav army and his robust style elevated him to commander of Bosnian Serb forces in the 1992-1995 war.

With the Dayton peace plan, he went into hiding, charged with genocide not just for Srebrenica but also jointly with Karadzic for the siege of Sarajevo and other crimes.

But while Karadzic reportedly survives by moving from one isolated cottage to another in Bosnia, chased by NATO commandos, Mladic’s experiences have been very different.

He has been seen skiing with bodyguards near Pale, the old Bosnian Serb capital. And Del Ponte told the Washington Post that even as she was meeting with Serb officials in Belgrade in October, Mladic was on the other side of city, tucking into a lavish dinner.

This is possible because Mladic, rumoured to be still on the army payroll, enjoys the affection of the officer corps.

He reportedly travels around with 20 bodyguards, posing a real problem for police commanders who fear that a determined effort to catch him would lead to a full-scale battle.

Even Del Ponte seems to realise that some flexibility, though not too much, was needed, when she told the Washington Post, “We cannot do anything, because we cannot risk armed conflict between the army and the police.”

Djindjic and Kostunica, meanwhile, are running out of room for manoeuvre. A second failed visit by Del Ponte is likely to mean only one thing – further financial penalties against Belgrade’s fragile economy.

Neither of the Belgrade leaders be happy with that, whatever their private feelings about the war crimes court.

Previously, Kostunica declared the extradition of Milosevic in 2001 illegal, while Djindjic once stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Karadzic as NATO bombed Pale.

New sanctions will hurt both. But they still believe that extradition of Mladic – seen as a war hero in Serbia – could be more risky than extradition of Milosevic that occurred last year.

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