

Regional Report: Levar Widow Legal Action

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Widow of murdered Croatian war crimes witness issues damages claim against government.

The widow of a Croatian army officer said to have been killed in retaliation for providing damning testimony to The Hague is suing the government for allegedly doing nothing to protect him.

Vesna Levar's husband, Milan, gave evidence at the tribunal six years ago about suspected Croatian atrocities against Serbs. He was later murdered by unknown assassins, despite Zagreb agreeing to a request from The Hague to provide him police protection.

His wife is seeking 800,000 kuna, around 100,000 euro, in damages from the government, claiming it did nothing to ensure his safety. She said she was reluctant to pursue the action, but had been forced to do so because of the authorities' failure to support her family.

"I was patient and I did not wish to file a lawsuit," Vesna Levar told IWPR. "I expected the state to help me, that my son Leon, who is now in the seventh grade, would get his father's pension and that we would be given a place to live in. However, no one did anything, I did not get a single kuna from the state."

Milan Levar was a commanding officer in the Croatian army's reconnaissance-sabotage team and surveillance and tapping centre in Gospic in 1991. In 1997, he made headlines here by volunteering to travel to the tribunal to give evidence about high-level army officers allegedly organising the systematic killing of Serbs in the area.

When Levar returned to Croatia after giving his testimony at The Hague, he spoke openly to the press. In interviews, he claimed to have had meetings in 1991 with Ivica Oreskovic, the secretary of the local crisis committee, and General Mirko Norac, surrounded by dead bodies.

"Dead, slaughtered people were lying on the floor, and the meeting was held in the midst of all this blood. I stand by my claim that Norac and Oreskovic were the ones who issued the orders and committed war crimes," Levar told a Novi list journalist.

He and his family were subsequently threatened and harassed as well as shunned by their neighbours in Gospic.

On April 1, 1998, the tribunal asked Zagreb to place Levar under police protection. Two weeks later, the government, then led by President Franjo Tudjman, informed the tribunal's chief prosecutor Carla Del Ponte that this would be taken care of.

But Levar's widow insists the government never provided her husband with any protective measures. And on August 28, 2000, Levar was killed by a bomb that exploded outside his Gospic house. His nine-year-old son witnessed the murder.

A police investigation into the killing - apparently retaliation for his testimony - confirmed Vesna Levar's allegations. It determined that Levar was never provided any protection because Tudjman's government

had not authorised the Gospic police to do so.

When Prime Minister Ivica Racan's government took power in 2000, it began investigating Levar's claims, and, in February 2001, indicted Norac for war crimes. The general was eventually tried and sentenced to 12 years in imprisonment and is currently appealing the conviction.

However, no one was ever arrested for the Levar murder and his family were not provided any compensation.

"The state did nothing for my husband, although it was issued an order to protect him. That is why I hold it indirectly responsible for his death," Vesna Levar told IWPR.

She said she is reluctant to wage a long legal battle against the state - as this will force her to relive her husband's murder - but has no choice.

Croatia's statute of limitations on cases like these is three years and this August will be the third anniversary of Levar's death.

"There is no money that could make up for the loss of my son's father, or for the loss of my husband. But at least life can be made easier for my son, because I cannot give him what he deserves," she said.

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