

Rights Group Demands More Pressure on Serbia

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Activists say Serbia must fully cooperate with tribunal before EU talks.

A human rights organisation has urged EU officials not to hold further talks aimed at forging links with Serbia until it surrenders war crimes fugitive Ratko Mladic to the Hague tribunal.

Human Rights Watch, HRW, sent a letter addressed to the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Olli Rehn, the EU Presidency, Angela Merkel, and the EU High Representative, Javier Solana, on March 26.

The letter, signed by two directors of HRW, expressed concern at “the indications from the EU in recent weeks that it may be prepared to resume negotiations with Serbia in the absence of full cooperation with the ICTY”.

Such a move, it said, would “undermine efforts to move Serbia towards a stable and democratic future based on respect for human rights and the rule of law” and increase the risk of war crimes suspects escaping justice.

Serbia’s EU accession talks were frozen last May as a result of its failure to hand over Mladic - the war time commander of Bosnian Serb forces who was indicted on genocide charges at the tribunal nearly 12 years ago.

Vojislav Kostunica, the Serbian prime minister, responded by announcing an action plan to cooperate with the tribunal, but this has yielded few results so far.

Earlier this month, Rehn met with Serbian president Boris Tadic and indicated that Belgrade could acquire EU candidacy status in 2008 if it resumed full cooperation on war crimes suspects.

In its letter this week, Human Rights Watch said that “full cooperation is best demonstrated by the arrest and transfer of Ratko Mladic and other fugitives believed to be on Serbian territory”.

It also called for the EU to maintain and communicate “a very high threshold” of that full cooperation with the tribunal means, and “to give strong support for the resumption of talks to be conditioned” on this cooperation.

Olga Kavran, spokesman for Carla Del Ponte, read out a statement by the chief prosecutor at a press conference held in The Hague on March 28.

“We can only hope that the recipients of the letter, that is - the European Union - will fully address the very serious concerns so forcefully expressed by Human Rights Watch,” it read.

“As you know, these are the same concerns repeatedly expressed by the Prosecutor and all those who

support international justice,” the statement concluded.

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