

Serbia: Mladic "Recruited" Infamous Scorpions

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Hague indictee personally enlisted services of Serb volunteer unit recently implicated in Bosnian atrocity.

General Ratko Mladic, the fugitive former Bosnian Serb commander, recruited the notorious Scorpions paramilitary force to fight alongside his troops in Bosnia just months before members of the former allegedly executed a number of Muslim men following the fall of Srebrenica, IWPR/BIRN has learned.

The revelation comes amid efforts to establish who directly controlled the Scorpions at the time they are said to have killed the Srebrenica men - which could have huge implications for the trial of Slobodan Milosevic in The Hague.

Two sources close to the former Serb authorities in the eastern Slavonia area of Croatia told IWPR/BIRN that in early 1995 General Mladic and several of his closest associates visited Djeletovici, the Scorpions' base.

Members of the unit are said to have appeared in a video shown a week ago at the Hague tribunal and on Serbian television executing six Muslim men and boys in the Trnovo area of eastern Bosnia following the collapse of the Srebrenica enclave.

The IWPR sources say Mladic, indicted by the Hague for war crimes, met the paramilitary force commander Slobodan Medic for several hours and enquired whether his men - Serb volunteers from Croatia and Serbia - would be prepared to back Bosnian Serb forces in increasingly intense fighting with Federation troops.

The meeting came at a time when officials from the Bosnian Serb entity Republika Srpska were openly considering a formal union with Serb-held parts of Croatia to counter the growing strength of Bosnian army forces.

"The aim of the visit was to secure [the Scorpions'] involvement and support of the [Bosnian Serbs forces]. Mladic and his associates spent several hours with Medic and after lunch and talks left," said one of the sources.

The source said the Scorpions' presence in the Trnovo area - where they are said to have cut off an important Bosnian army military supply route - came as a direct result of an agreement between Mladic and the commander of the paramilitary unit, "The Scorpions were there to help [Bosnian Serb forces] combat Bosnian Federation forces."

The Scorpions' alleged involvement in war crimes could have significant ramifications for the Milosevic trial. Prosecutors accuse the defendant of genocide in Bosnia, backing this up with documentation and witness testimonies showing that he financed and provided logistical support for the Bosnian Serb forces. But they've so far failed to come up with the so-called "smoking gun", evidence that he was directly linked to massacres there.

The question that will necessarily arise at the tribunal, should the tape showing the executions be admitted into evidence, is under whose command the Scorpions operated in the summer of 1995 when they are alleged to have killed the six Muslim men and boys in Trnovo. The prosecution at the tribunal claim that the Milosevic-led Serbian security authorities were in charge of the unit, while the former Belgrade leader has insisted that it was under the control of the Croatian Serb authorities.

According to IWPR sources, the Scorpions at the time of the atrocity were formally part of the 11th Corps of the VRSK, the Army of the Republic of Serb Krajina, the self-proclaimed Croatian Serb statelet.

Medic, in testimony given a few years ago in a case involving one of his former comrades, said the Scorpions unit was formed in 1991, initially to provide security for the eastern Slavonian oil fields. He added that in 1996 it became a reserve unit in the Serbian Public Security Service Special Anti-Terrorist Unit, SAJ.

This was confirmed last week at the Milosevic trial, when witness General Obrad Stevanovic, the former Serbian assistant interior minister, told the court that "the earliest point that [the Scorpions] could have been [subordinated to the Serbian interior ministry] would have been after the end of the war in Krajina, after mid 1996 or perhaps slightly earlier [that year]".

A recently published report by the Serbian organised crime department into links between the Scorpions and the Belgrade authorities says that the paramilitary unit did not come under the command of the SAJ until March 1999.

Although the Scorpions may have been directly controlled by VRSK military chiefs, there's evidence that the paramilitaries had links with the security establishment in Belgrade, especially at the time it was created.

In his court testimony, Medic admitted that when the unit was formed in 1991 it was part of the Yugoslav armed forces. And the then Serbian defence minister, Marko Negovanovic, told Serbia's parliament in December that year that Serb volunteer units in the Krajina came under Belgrade military command.

While prosecutors' acquisition of the Trnovo video has handed them a potentially valuable piece of evidence in their bid to convict Milosevic on genocide charges, observers warn they would still have their work cut out to prove the Hague defendant was responsible for the Scorpions when they allegedly committed the killings shown on the tape.

According to Heikelina Verrijn Stuart, a Dutch legal journalist and a longtime observer of the Milosevic trial, this link could still pose a challenge to prosecutors.

"If there is no evidence of the [Scorpions] being a part of the structure of the Serbian police at the time [of the killings], the prosecutors will need to reconstruct the link between Milosevic and the group....out of available of documents, witness testimonies and circumstantial evidence, much of which they have already shown in court," she told IWPR. "And all this together could prove to keep the group too far away from Milosevic [for the genocide charge to be proven]."

Apart from evidence that he financed and provided logistical support for the Bosnian Serbs, there may be more material linking the former Serbian leader and Mladic in the archive of ex-Yugoslavia's top military body, the Supreme Defence Council, which has been accepted into evidence in the Milosevic case under protective measures on the insistence of Belgrade.

But if the prosecutors could prove that the Scorpions were in 1995 part of the Serbian police forces, official or clandestine, the picture could change dramatically. "If such link exists, and it's proven, that could be truly disastrous for Milosevic," said Verrijn Stuart.

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