

Serbia: New Mass Graves Found

Author: [IWPR team](#)

More evidence of mass killings of Albanian civilians could soon emerge, but the perpetrators of these crimes may never be prosecuted.

The authorities are preparing to exhume four new mass graves, which are expected to contain more bodies of ethnic Albanians killed in the Kosovo conflict, judicial sources say.

Three of the sites are thought to be located in Batajnica, near Belgrade, while the fourth is near Vranje, in southern Serbia.

A judicial source said the first exhumation at Batajnica will begin "in a couple of days". He said about 400 to 500 people were buried there and foreign donors had supplied funds for the work.

The latest move by the Serbian judiciary does not imply that the perpetrators of these crimes face punishment, however.

Judicial sources complain that the police have impeded, rather than expedited, investigations of mass graves containing the bodies of 470 murdered Albanians, which have already been exhumed.

Judicial officials say no criminal charges have been brought because the police refused to identify the perpetrators of the killings and their accomplices.

Serbia's interior minister, Dusan Mihajlovic, said three months ago that police had finished their share of the job and it was up to the courts to make any further moves.

But Milan Sarajlic, deputy district prosecutor in Belgrade, said the police had merely informed the courts of the discovery of the corpses and provided some information about their personal belongings and documents.

The public prosecutor could not prosecute those responsible for the killings "because we do not know who the perpetrators are," Sarajlic said. "The police need to file charges against the perpetrators, including their names and surnames, for specific crimes but they have done nothing of the sort."

The courts attribute the obstructive stance of the police to the fact that little changed in the police department after the fall of Slobodan Milosevic in 2000, beyond the replacement of a few top officials.

Judicial sources say the Milosevic-era police are "covering up and removing the traces leading towards those responsible for mass graves", mainly to protect themselves from potential prosecution.

The process of identifying the killers and their accomplices should not be difficult, given that at least two mass graves were discovered on police property in Batajnica, inside a training centre at the base of a special unit there.

Reports of the first Batajnica site to be discovered were leaked to the media two weeks before the new government decided last June to hand over Milosevic to The Hague war crimes tribunal.

Facing heavy international pressure to extradite Milosevic to the tribunal, but wary of being labelled a traitor by nationalists at home, the new prime minister, Zoran Djindjic, purposely shocked the public with revelations of the existence of mass graves to counter expected outrage over the former Yugoslav president's deportation.

Several days after Milosevic's arrest and hand-over to the tribunal, the public was flooded with police reports concerning two more mass graves. One was sited in a special unit compound, at Petrovo Selo, in eastern Serbia, while the other was near an artificial lake at Perucac, in western Serbia.

Soon after, news of the second Batajnica site was broken, containing the largest number of corpses. Dragan Karleusa, deputy head of the anti-organised crime squad, said on May 25 last year the bodies belonged to victims of a "cleaning-up operation" in Kosovo.

Karleusa said Milosevic had ordered the aforementioned operation in March 1999 at a meeting with his interior minister, Vlastimir Djordjevic, and the secret police and regular police chiefs, Radomir Markovic and Vlastimir Djordjevic.

The impression was given that the police were investigating the case with some energy. Serbia's deputy

prime minister, Zarko Korac, confirmed this when he said efforts to collect evidence on the killings were being stepped up to expand Milosevic's indictment for war crimes.

But no criminal charges were brought against any alleged suspects mentioned by Karleusa. While Milosevic and Markovic were jailed, Stojiljkovic committed suicide and Djordjevic was reported to have moved to Moscow.

Police sources say Djordjevic was in charge of removing the bodies from Kosovo and burying them at secret locations in Serbia. They say that when a refrigerator truck containing the bodies of murdered Albanians resurfaced from the depths of the Danube, near Tekija, in April 1999, during the NATO bombing, Djordjevic ordered details of this case to be kept secret.

Curiously, when Djordjevic disappeared abroad, the police only issued an internal arrest warrant, not an international one.

The police have become increasingly reluctant to comment on the mass graves. Unusually, they have failed even to reveal the names of those who had dug the graves.

At a news conference on the lorry that was full of bodies, Serbia's interior minister, Dusan Mihajlovic, blandly said the corpses from the truck were transported to Batajnica and handed over to "unidentified officials", without enlarging on who those officials were.

It became clear that the police were determined to pass the "hot potato" of mass graves to the judiciary, leaving the courts and the prosecutor's office to take any subsequent blame for inefficiency in the investigation. Journalists who tried to extract more information on the investigation found themselves referred to the judiciary.

In late April, the district prosecutor of Belgrade, Rade Terzic, said his office had requested after the first reports of mass graves that police to "check all the facts related to the circumstances of death". He said he told the police that "if these persons [had] suffered at the hands of perpetrators of crimes against the civilian population, the circumstances of their violent death should be investigated".

However, judicial sources suggest that the police are spreading rumours that Prime Minister Djindjic himself told the prosecutor's office to halt its investigation, apparently out of fears that his own position might be jeopardised. The Palace of Justice, the principal judicial authority in Serbia, has resolutely denied this, arguing that the premier insisted on the completion of the investigation.

The Belgrade district court's investigating judge, Nenad Cavlina, who is in charge of the first Batajnica mass grave site, said the judiciary's work there was almost complete. He said he had issued a warrant for the 36 corpses to be identified through DNA analysis and that forensic experts had taken samples from all the disinterred human remains, while UNMIK provided blood samples of the victims' relatives in Kosovo. "All the evidence was sent to Madrid for DNA analysis and we're expecting results from Spain any time now," he said.

Cavlina's colleague, Milan Dilparic, in charge of the investigation at the second Batajnica site, containing 269 bodies, said his case was also proceeding satisfactorily. He also denies the investigation has been deliberately obstructed and insists that a warrant for the exhumation and identification of the bodies was issued and that DNA analysis was underway.

Dilparic said the Red Cross would soon be in a position to compile a database of the victims' belongings, including watches, necklaces, rings, cash and personal documents, which would be made available to their relatives for identification purposes.

A similar procedure is reportedly underway for the 74 corpses exhumed in Petrovo Selo and the 60 bodies disinterred near the lake at Perucac.

But the police are highly reluctant to answer questions on their own activities in connection with the mass graves. Serbia's deputy interior minister, Nenad Milic, recently said they were "still undertaking all available measures and actions within their powers to shed light on all the circumstances related to these events".

Requests for the interior ministry to supply hard information on these "measures and actions" invariably hit a brick wall. The response is always the same, "Given that the evidence is in the possession of the judicial organs, the police have reached an agreement that judiciary officials comment on these issues".

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