

## **Serbia: Slijivancanin Captured**

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Third most wanted war crimes fugitive in detention following marathon arrest operation.

Leading war crimes suspect Veselin Slijivancanin was captured at his Belgrade home this week, following a ten-hour operation that provoked violent public protests.

More than 1,000 protesters gathered in the early afternoon of June 12 after police arrived at the home of the retired Yugoslav National Army, JNA, colonel in the western suburb of Cukarica. Violence erupted after special police units came to break down the armoured door protecting the fugitive early the following day.

Police used tear gas and flash grenades to disperse the angry crowds, many of whom threw bricks, set fires and damaged nearly 20 cars at the scene.

The protesters included members of the Committee for the Defence of Slijivancanin, members of right-wing nationalist groups, such as the Serbian Radical Party and supporters of the football club Rad - who are well known for their thuggish behaviour.

Slijivancanin, one of the so-called Vukovar Three, is accused of involvement in the 1991 deaths of more than 200 Croatians, who had been taken from Vukovar hospital and transported to the nearby Ovcara farm for execution.

He is the third most wanted war crimes fugitive after

Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic.

He was indicted by The Hague eight years ago, and has been on the run since the fall of Slobodan Milosevic's regime in October 2000.

His arrest came just two days before a deadline set by the United States, which had threatened to withhold a vital multi-million dollar aid package if Serbia didn't demonstrate its willingness to cooperate with the tribunal, by arresting and extraditing indicted suspects.

The operation to arrest Slijivancanin was launched after Serbian intelligence reported that he had returned to his Belgrade apartment to celebrate his 50th birthday with his family.

The ten-hour action - which left more than 50 police officers and 30 protesters injured - has been criticised for taking too long.

One Belgrade defence analyst - who spoke on condition of anonymity - told IWPR that the police were simply looking to maximise media coverage.

"These kind of actions can be carried out in very different ways, but it shouldn't take ten hours. In that

time you can bring down a wall, let alone a simple armoured door," he said.

But Interior Minister Dusan Mihajlovic defended the operation, saying that concern for the safety of the war crimes suspect's family and other residents had slowed up the final arrest.

In Vukovar, Nikola Safer, the head of the regional municipality, hailed the detention as the fulfillment of justice and recognition of thousands of victims suffering from all nations.

"I am sure that this arrest gives a powerful signal to the region and a message that crimes would not remain unpunished. I personally congratulate all people who were involved in the arrest. Personally I think that Serbia required a lot of civil courage to accomplish it."

The Hague tribunal also welcomed the news. Prosecution spokesperson Florence Hartmann told the media, "This proves that where there's a will, there's a way." She added that the remaining 18 war crimes suspects still believed to be in the country should soon follow Slijivancanin to the tribunal.

The colonel's two co-accused, Mile Mrksic and Miroslav Radic, are already in The Hague awaiting trial.

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