

Zagreb Arrests 'Small Fish'

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Will Croatia's detention of minor war crimes suspects satisfy Carla Del Ponte?

The embattled government of Prime Minister Ivica Racan has embarked on a series of arrests of war crimes suspects, in a bid to head off tribunal criticism of Zagreb's failure to cooperate with the international court.

The real sticking point appears to be the fate of General Ante Gotovina who went into hiding shortly after his indictment on war crimes charges in March this year.

The arrests, which preceded a secret meeting between the deputy prime minister, Goran Granic, and chief prosecutor Carla Del Ponte on August 30, are designed to demonstrate Zagreb's willingness to cooperate with the tribunal, without precipitating a right wing backlash.

The authorities appear to have learned some lessons since the mass protests which were sparked by the warrant for the arrest of General Mirko Norac in February. This time round, they have focused their attention on less controversial suspects, as a way of retaining their credibility in The Hague on the one hand and diffusing right-wing anger, on the other.

Those arrested during a mid-August sweep include four senior police officers from Bjelovar, suspected of committing crimes against Serbian soldiers in 1991, when the Croatian Army, HV, and police captured the town, the site of a large Yugoslav People's Army garrison.

The chief suspect, deputy police chief Luka Markesic, is believed to have ordered his three accomplices to execute seven POWs. One survivor is the chief prosecution witness at their forthcoming trial.

Early last week, police also arrested and charged four former HV members from Dalmatia with the September 1995 killing of 12 Serbian civilians in Varivode, between Sibenik and Knin, in the aftermath of Operation Storm in August 1995.

The Tudjman regime prosecuted several HV members for the Varivode killings as long ago as 1999, but they were treated as crimes motivated by robbery, rather than ethnic hatred. The same suspects were recently prosecuted on war crimes charges but found innocent.

In a further attempt to demonstrate its willingness to work with The Hague, the government recently announced plans to create a special department dealing with war crimes, and called on state prosecutor Radovan Ortynski to draw up a list of atrocities committed by Croats in what is known as the Homeland War.

Forthcoming judicial proceedings are expected to deal with massacres of POWs in Sibenik in 1992 and in Miljevci in 1993; the torture of POWs at Split's Lora prison in 1991, 1992 and 1993; and the killing of 20 Serbian civilians at Sisak in 1991.

The Sibenik state prosecutor, Zeljko Zganjer, launched an investigation in 1999 into claims by former military policeman Mario Barisic that he had witnessed the torture and murder of POWs in Kuline prison in 1992. He is also chief witness to the HV killings in Miljevci and the torture at Lora prison in Split. Charges

are expected soon.

According to Barisic, and the testimony of other witnesses, members of the Croatia's military intelligence service, SIS, and the military police, were responsible for the war crimes in Sibenik and Split. Barisic said he had informed the authorities of the crimes at the time. The military police chief Mato Lausic, the deputy defence minister Josip Perkovic, the late defence minister Gojko Susak and the late president Franjo Tudjman were all notified. The army establishment simply did not respond.

Proceedings are also expected shortly against Djuro Brodarac, president of Sisak County in 1991, who, witnesses say, ordered the murder of Serbian civilians in Sisak the same year.

Meanwhile, justice minister Stjepan Ivanisevic and state prosecutor Radovan Ortynski have announced that the investigation into the torture of civilians in Pakracka poljana, Pakrac, in 1991 and 1992 is to be reopened. A number of witnesses in the 1992 trial altered their statements, allegedly under pressure from the intelligence service, and the original suspects were released. Tomislav Mercep, who commanded a military unit in Pakracka poljana at the time, has been cited as a prime suspect. This second trial will be based on new evidence and will be treated as a war crimes investigation.

All these trials will be held before the Croatian courts, but whether the recent flurry of arrests will alleviate criticism from The Hague over the failure to arrest general Gotovina is uncertain. Del Ponte has warned the prime minister that he is "obliged" to extradite the general, but Racan can expect massive public protest if he even tries to arrest a man lionised as a national hero.

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