

A Fugitive To Some, But a Hero To Others

Karadzic's Flight Keeps Bosnian Hatreds Alive

By Daniel Williams

Washington Post Foreign Service

Monday, July 26, 2004; Page A13

SOKOLAC, Bosnia -- When Milovan Bjelica, a Bosnian Serb nationalist, invites visitors to speak with him, he chooses a windswept hill cemetery that he calls his office.

Meeting people among the dozens of white crosses marked with photos of young soldiers and some civilians gives him comfort, he said. The setting reminds him of the sacrifices of the 1992-95 ethnic war in Bosnia, which by his account was a sacred struggle for the right of Serbs to live apart from Bosnian Muslims.

The cemetery also allows him to avoid the prying eyes of international peacekeeping troops who suspect him of helping hide Radovan Karadzic, the president of the Bosnian Serbs' breakaway state during the war and now in his ninth year on the run from war crimes charges.

"If I visit with someone in a private office, then that office and its owners will become tainted," he said in a conversation at the cemetery. "They will be harassed for letting me in. So I meet with people here. Here I am among Serbs who cannot be bothered anymore."

The manhunt, including occasional raids on suspected hideouts and detentions of suspected associates, has failed to collar Karadzic. A U.N. war crimes tribunal accuses Karadzic of responsibility for the deaths in 1995 of more than 7,000 Muslim captives in the Bosnian hamlet of Srebrenica. He is also charged in connection with the shelling of the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo, and the capture of international peacekeepers for use as human shields.

Karadzic's continued flight has set back efforts to end the bitter hatreds of Bosnia's three-sided Muslim-Serb-Croat ethnic war and put the country on the path to joining the European Union. In June, NATO delayed Bosnia's membership in the Partnership for Peace, an apprentice program for full membership in the Atlantic alliance, pending Karadzic's detention.

Similarly, the fruitless hunt for Karadzic's former military commander, Ratko Mladic, has complicated the E.U. aspirations of the neighboring country of Serbia and Montenegro, where he is believed to be hiding. The country's new president, Boris Tadic, has promised to cooperate with international efforts to apprehend him.

International officials who help administer and police Bosnia say the fugitives remain at large in part because many Serbs see them as heroes who protected their ethnic community during the upheavals of the 1990s. Some people help them actively; others help passively by keeping quiet.

In May, soldiers from the NATO-led contingent known formally as the Stabilization Force (SFOR) detained Bjelica and held him a month for interrogation. International officials say he has funneled money to Karadzic and helped maintain his security detail.

Bjelica denies such a role and says that NATO is simply flailing with frustration. "Does this look like a real manhunt to you? If they are really trying to find him, they will. They have the troops, the technical ability, everything," he said.

The nine years of futility has eroded belief among Bosnia's citizens that NATO is really trying. Now the search for a man whose harsh nationalist rhetoric and mass of gray hair were familiar symbols of Serb militancy has entered a phase of finger-pointing among the international agencies tasked with bringing him to justice.

In mid-July, Florence Hartmann, a spokeswoman for chief U.N. war crimes prosecutor Carla del Ponte, accused NATO peacekeepers of failing to follow up on leads about Karadzic's whereabouts.

Last February, Hartmann said, tribunal investigators determined that Karadzic was in Zaovine, a hamlet near the Bosnian border, and gave the information to commanders of the peacekeeping force. "We didn't see any further steps," she said. "We were not happy with this experience."

"You can never be 100 percent sure about the information," she said. "But NATO just stalled. They asked for more information instead of checking things out themselves."

"NATO is sending out a confusing message," she said. "They are hinting that it is not their mandate to go after Karadzic. But it is."

In Sarajevo, a member of the war crimes tribunal tracking team that actively hunts for Karadzic said NATO officials demanded an exact address of the house where Karadzic was hiding, details on the house's door, whether the house had a garage or a garden, and other information.

"Zaovine has only 15 houses. All they had to do was send a few troops and surround it," said the tracker, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Mark Hope, a British naval lieutenant commander and SFOR spokesman, said the February information was not as precise as Hartmann indicated. "We do get such information. If it is sufficient to act on, we do so," he said. A senior international official who spoke on condition of anonymity said the information provided by the war crimes trackers placed Karadzic not in Bosnia, but in neighboring Serbia, which NATO forces cannot enter.

Hope pointed out that SFOR has detained 28 war crimes suspects over the past several years. But he said that its 12,000-member force was not large enough to mount an operation on the scale of the manhunts for Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan or for deposed president Saddam Hussein last year in Iraq. He noted that despite the resources available in Afghanistan, "Osama bin Laden has evaded capture for three years."

It is "primarily the responsibility of Serb authorities" to catch Karadzic, he added. But he said NATO sees the capture as in line with its primary mission to make Bosnia safe and secure.

International civilian officials in Sarajevo have been pressuring Bosnian Serb leaders and suspected Karadzic sympathizers to help find him. Last month, Paddy Ashdown, the internationally appointed administrator in Bosnia, fired 59 Serbs from government positions in the Serb-run administrative zone.

Ashdown, whose authority derives from the 1995 Dayton Accords that ended the war, said at the time that Serb officials were aiding Karadzic by creating "a climate of secrecy and impunity. . . . The Serb Republic has been in the grip of a small band of corrupt politicians and criminals for far too long."

In a subsequent interview, Ashdown said that although Serb officials hinder Karadzic's capture, it is NATO's responsibility to track him down. "NATO has the only people with the military power to catch him," he said. "But the Serb Republic has scandalously failed to fulfill its commitment to cooperate. Do you see posters from the Serb Republic calling for Karadzic to give up? They haven't made a single arrest of a suspect in nine years," he said.

Zoran Zuza, a former journalist who lost his job as an aide to a Serb parliamentary official, is one of those fired by Ashdown. He said he had no information about Karadzic and had not been asked about him by NATO.

Zuza said Ashdown was correct in saying that a culture of silence surrounded Karadzic. Crime was one of the reasons, Zuza said. "Smuggling survived the war and a small group of people became rich and they are holding on to what they have. Some of the cream goes to Radovan," he said.

"But there is also the feeling that the war crimes court is unfair, and that Radovan is right to avoid it," he said. "It is an old Serb attitude and it is long-lasting."

Ashdown dismissed Bjelica from his post as chairman of a Serb neighborhood assembly near Sarajevo last year, accusing him of presiding over a network of legal and illegal businesses that helped protect Karadzic.

Bjelica said that because of his pariah status, he can no longer earn a living and gets by with the help of friends. Nonetheless, he remains defiant and is organizing an expansion of the Sokolac cemetery to accommodate the bodies of Serbs brought from Sarajevo for reburial.

Serbs fled that city by the thousands after war ended. "We want to have a complete break from the Muslims," he said. "We did not want to live with them and we don't want to be buried near them." In his view, Bosnia has no future as a single state and the three ethnic groups should go their own way.

He acknowledges having had contact with Karadzic's family in the town of Pale, 15 miles southeast of Sarajevo, after the war, but said he had since dropped them. "I used to be a kind of family postman," he said.

During detention, he said, interrogators asked about his contacts with Karadzic, whether he knew others who had contacts, whether the Serbian Orthodox Church was helping the fugitive and who gave money to him.

"They asked and asked, and finally, one said I was a victim of bad information," Bjelica said, meaning a false tip had led to his arrest. "It is easy to get someone to accuse someone else of a crime here. I am a small fish. I am not the key to the search," he continued.

But Bjelica makes no effort to hide his admiration for Karadzic: "I knew him during the war and I followed him. I would not like anything bad to happen to Radovan."

© 2004 The Washington Post Company