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Where Even the Most Wanted Can Find a Refuge

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By DANIEL SIMPSON

CELEBICI, Bosnia and Herzegovina — Anyone hoping the simple peasants in these remote mountains will betray their wartime hero to a few foreign soldiers can expect a long wait. The corner of Bosnia's Serbian republic, where Radovan Karadzic, the former Bosnian Serb leader who has been indicted for war crimes, has eluded NATO peacekeepers for six years is an impenetrable world.

Maps show that the occasional dirt road snakes up through the forests to a porous border with Montenegro. But they reveal nothing about the suspicious and angry people who live there, reared on tales of centuries of oppression by outsiders and soured by the nationalist fervor Dr. Karadzic stoked.

The United States is offering a reward of \$5 million for information leading to the capture of Dr. Karadzic, a former psychiatrist who propelled Bosnia's Serbs into a brutal war with their Muslim and Croatian neighbors, carving out a monoethnic fiefdom. NATO helicopters drop leaflets advertising the reward.

But there are no obvious takers for the money in Celebici, an almost medieval hamlet of a dozen buildings, where weather-beaten men and women grow much of their own food and herd animals on the surrounding slopes.

"They can look for him as much as they want, but they'll never find him," said a woman who would give only her first name, Milojka, as she served drinks in Celebici's lone cafe. "He was a good man. People will protect him."

One of her customers, Milko Radovanov, seemed bemused by the fuss made about Dr. Karadzic, who is accused of organizing Europe's worst massacre since World War II.

"Why are they so interested in him?" he asked. "Why not go after someone else?"

Dr. Karadzic, once easily recognized by his shock of bushy gray hair, is now rumored to move about disguised as an Orthodox priest. He appears to be unbowed.

"They have trodden on the grass and flowers of my mountain meadows, frightening the birds in the sky, the wolves and other animals in the forest," he is said to have written in a recent letter to his supporters in Serbia, who have posted what purports to be a copy on their Web site, www.karadzic.org. "I have in the meantime acquired thousands of new friends who are unknown to my prosecutors. And every day I gain more friends."

A small force of NATO troops swooped into Celebici by helicopter one day earlier this year, eager to silence critics who complained of a hitherto timid effort to get their man.

All they managed to unearth was a small haul of guns, grenades and ammunition, a weapons cache left over from a conflict that claimed 200,000 lives and drove a million people from their homes.

Most of Celebici's inhabitants say Dr. Karadzic, 57, has never hidden here, although a few said differently on the day of the raid. Others prefer to joke that he drops by for coffee.

Despite being paid compensation for having the locks blown off their doors, they loathe the NATO-led Stabilization Force, viewing it as yet another occupying power. Its conspicuous failure to catch one of the world's most wanted men stirs their pride.

Lt. Gen. John B. Sylvester, the American officer who commands the NATO peacekeepers, has no illusions about penetrating the many tiny communities like Celebici in the region where Dr. Karadzic is thought to be hiding.

"When we go in there, obviously we are recognized as 'them,' 'they,' 'somebody else,' 'foreigners,'" he said. "That makes it difficult to go in on his turf and find him."

Although he has 18,000 soldiers at his disposal, General Sylvester is hamstrung. The governments who sent them, particularly his own, are frightened of casualties, and a serious shootout with the heavily armed bodyguards assumed to be protecting Dr. Karadzic is a risk they prefer to avoid.

Small numbers of German troops patrol the region regularly and they are watched wherever they go.

It is impossible to get to Celebici by road without traveling through Foca, a town full of ardent Karadzic supporters whose hostility toward the Muslims they killed or expelled during the war has deterred refugees from returning.

Although the war crimes tribunal in The Hague has convicted three Serbs from Foca for raping, torturing and enslaving Muslim women and girls, Zoran Vukovic, the local chief of police, believes the town does not deserve its bad name.

"I was born here," he said. "I've lived here all my life. I know that the crimes Serbs are accused of were not committed here."

After NATO passed up its best chance of snatching Dr. Karadzic when the war ended in 1995, it seemed content to leave men like Mr. Vukovic to chase suspected war criminals, as they are supposed to under the Dayton peace accords.

But the embarrassment of seeing Dr. Karadzic and his former military commander, Gen. Ratko Mladic, still at large has forced NATO to make more of an effort, or at least new promises.

"The noose is closing," General Sylvester said. "We've been looking real hard now for about three years and we'll get him."

He has even tried writing to Dr. Karadzic's wife, asking her to persuade him to turn himself in and "help the people of the Serb republic be accepted by the countries and peoples of Europe." Dr. Ljiljana Zelen-Karadzic, the head of the Bosnian Serb Red Cross, politely refused. In a letter that was leaked to a Bosnian newspaper, she replied that her husband was "good-natured without a hint of aggression" and would consent to a meeting with General Sylvester only if the genocide charges were dropped.

Perceiving themselves as history's eternal victims, many Serbs are convinced that only unity can save them. Watching Dr. Karadzic being hunted gives them a new reason to identify with him.

His former information minister, Miroslav Toholj, is even publishing a book of children's poetry apparently written by Dr. Karadzic in hiding.

Dr. Karadzic, who worked at the main hospital in Sarajevo before embarking on his protracted bombardment of the encircled city, always dismissed reports that children were among the victims of the Serbian shelling as "Muslim propaganda."