

Denouncing Serbian Tilt, U.S. Boycotts U.N. Meeting
By Rick Gladstone, The New York Times
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The United States boycotted a United Nations General Assembly meeting on Wednesday, organized by the former Serbian foreign minister who is the body's current president, that in theory was about the role of international criminal justice but appeared to be a thinly disguised Serb complaint forum about the war-crimes tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

Canada and Jordan joined the United States in the boycott of the two-day meeting, which included a General Assembly debate and panel discussion, while some other nations also criticized the meeting and sent low-level representatives. The event seemed to reopen emotional scabs about responsibility for ethnic slaughters committed in the Balkans conflicts of the 1990s, including the Srebrenica massacre, Europe's worst mass killing since the Holocaust.

Critics took offense that the General Assembly president, Vuk Jeremic, whose antipathy toward the Yugoslavia tribunal is well known, had invited as keynote speaker the like-minded president of Serbia, Tomislav Nikolic, but not the victims of Balkans atrocities who have found some measure of redress from the tribunal's prosecutions.

"The United States strongly disagrees with the decision of the president of the General Assembly to hold an unbalanced, inflammatory thematic debate today on the role of international criminal justice in reconciliation and will not participate," Erin Pelton, a spokeswoman for the United States mission to the United Nations, said in a statement. "We regret in particular that the way today's thematic debate and the related panel discussion are structured fail to provide the victims of these atrocities an appropriate voice."

A few diplomats, including Jordan's ambassador, Prince Zeid al-Hussein, a former United Nations peacekeeper in Bosnia, suggested that Mr. Jeremic had abused his authority as president to advance his nationalist agenda through the meeting, an accusation that Mr. Jeremic denied.

The Security Council established the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in 1993 to prosecute those responsible for the slaughters, rapes and ethnic cleansing of the Balkans conflicts that fractured Yugoslavia. The tribunal is considered a precursor to others supported by the United Nations to deal with war crimes, including those for Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Cambodia, as well as the International Criminal Court.

The Yugoslavia tribunal indicted 161 people, according to its Web site, with proceedings concluded on 136 defendants and 25 still on trial. While the biggest number of cases are against Serbs or Bosnian Serbs, charges have also been brought against defendants of other ethnicities, including Croats, Bosnian Muslims and Kosovo Albanians, for crimes committed against Serbs.

But a tribunal appeals ruling in November, freeing two Croat generals convicted of crimes against Serbs, outraged many Serbs who had always viewed the tribunal as biased against them and as an instrument to taint their national image permanently. The ruling also was denounced by Serbia's ally Russia and was a catalyst for Mr. Jeremic's vow to convene a General Assembly meeting on the role of tribunals in national reconciliation.

As the date of the meeting grew closer, a number of invited guests, including the president of the International Criminal Court and the executive director of Human Rights Watch, decided not to attend. Ban Ki-moon, the secretary general, disappointed some rights activists by attending, but he defended the tribunals and left before Mr. Nikolic spoke.

“We cannot expect to attain our goals of peace, development and respect for human rights without promoting and supporting a robust system of international criminal justice,” Mr. Ban said. “Supporting the tribunals and courts means respecting — and not calling into question — their independence, impartiality and integrity.”

Mr. Nikolic was blunt in his 45-minute speech, denouncing what he called the biased prosecutions, selective justice and “flagrant violation of human rights.”

Mr. Jeremic’s speech, opening the meeting, did not single out the Yugoslav tribunal, but to critics his intent seemed clear. “Reconciliation necessitates each side to accept its share of responsibility,” he said. An outcome that assigns communal blame, he said, “would harm efforts to strengthen the rule of law, for no legal tradition recognizes the guilt or innocence of an entire nation.”

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