

More War Criminals Hauled Up

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BELGRADE, Sep 29 (IPS) - Serb war criminals are figuring that they might run, but they cannot hide forever.

Ten years after the wars in Croatia and Bosnia ended and six years after Serb security forces withdrew from the southern Kosovo province, many suspects wanted for massacres of non-Serbs are being brought to justice.

Over the past few weeks there has been a wave of arrests abroad.

Last week Canadian authorities announced the extradition of Dejan Demirovic (30), former member of the Serb paramilitary group 'Scorpions' that was notorious for war crimes against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo in 1999.

Demirovic is suspected in the execution of 14 people, including six children, in Podujevo town.

His partner in the group, Sasa Cvijetan, was sentenced to 20 years for this crime by a Belgrade court. It was discovered in the course of Cvijetan's trial last year that Demirovic was living with his parents in Windsor, Ontario.

"Bringing war criminals to justice is the most important thing for the region," head of the Humanitarian Law Centre Natasa Kandic told IPS. "The confusion in ordinary people's minds about whether the executors were war heroes or merciless killers finally has to end. The recognition of war crimes is the starting point for the process of reconciliation in the Balkans."

More than 200,000 people were killed in wars of the 1990s in former Yugoslavia, most of them non-Serbs. Memories of those days are still recent enough.

"A while ago it was exactly 13 years since I became a person without home, name or nationality, and I'm happy that the man who caused all that is behind bars," said Sarajevo journalist Nerma Jelacic (28).

She was commenting on the arrest of Bosnian Serb Milan Lukic (37) in Argentina. He had been living before that in Serbia and the Serb region of eastern Bosnia.

Lukic was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment by a Belgrade court in absentia earlier this year for war crimes in Bosnia in 1992. He and his paramilitary group 'Avengers' pushed 140 Muslims including old men, women and children into a house in the small town of Visegrad and set it on fire.

Lukic's cousin Sredoje, accused in the same crime, was arrested earlier this month in Russia.

They are both being extradited to the United Nations founded International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague.

Nerma Jelacic who fled Visegrad with her mother after the extermination of Muslims began, and lived as a refugee in Britain for 10 years, has said what Lukic meant to her. "It's a small town and the only name mentioned, with fear, in connection to crimes was that of Milan Lukic," she wrote in a column in the prominent Belgrade daily Danas.

"I returned to Bosnia in 2003, as roots are deep," she wrote. "I tried to find Milan Lukic as I knew he lived between Serbia and eastern Bosnia, I had to know why he did it, why some 3,000 people from my home town had to be killed. Unfortunately, I could not reach him."

Argentina became the sanctuary for another war crimes suspect, Nebojsa Minic, wanted for the execution of dozens of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo in 1999. He was arrested earlier this year and extradited to Serbia. He owned a chain of restaurants in the Argentine town of Mendoza.

In another development, 13 Bosnian Serb men were arrested in Phoenix in the United States on suspicion of giving false information when seeking asylum a decade ago. Some of them come from Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia where more than 8,000 Muslim men were executed by the Bosnian Serb Army in 1995.

"It's outrageous that people from the most wanted lists obtained papers and passports, passed strict immigration rules and settled somewhere," political analyst Dejan Anastasijevic told IPS.

Most countries introduced strict visa regulations for Serbs in 1991 when former leader Slobodan Milosevic turned down all international peace proposals, and precipitated a war in the Balkans.

Investigations have revealed that the passports of many war crimes suspects arrested abroad were issued to them, sometimes under assumed names, before Oct. 5, 2000, when Milosevic's regime fell from power.

"It is obvious that those people were aware of dangers and were provided all the necessary items to flee," Belgrade lawyer Bozo Prelevic told IPS. Their funds, he said, came through years of robbery during the wars. There was widespread looting and theft through the wars, together with extortion of money from non-Serbs. Many 'war heroes' engaged in smuggling operations.

The two main war crime suspects, however, former leader Radovan Karadzic and Bosnian Serb Army commander Gen. Ratko Mladic are still at large.

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