

Kosovo, EU clash over war crimes case against former ethnic Albanian rebels

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Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaci clashed Monday with the European Union rule of law mission in the country over the arrest of a former rebel commander on war crimes charges.

Thaci said the weekend arrest of Fatmir Limaj, a lawmaker from his party, was "unjust and shameful."

"This is not justice, this is persecution," Thaci said. "This is the biggest and gravest insult made to us. We are the sovereign in this country. We have our laws and our constitution."

The comments are the strongest against the EU rule of law mission — known as EULEX — since it deployed in 2008 to help Kosovo authorities fight organized crime and deal with sensitive war crimes cases.

Earlier on Monday the top EU official in Kosovo, Samuel Zbogar, urged leaders to stop interfering in the case against Limaj and three other former ethnic Albanian rebels suspected of killing Serb detainees during the 1998-99 Kosovo war.

"A fundamental principle of any modern, democratic society is non-interference in the judicial process," said a statement from Zbogar's office. "Decisions by EULEX prosecutors and judges have never been, are not and will never be politically motivated."

Last week an EU-led panel of judges overturned a previous verdict that acquitted Limaj and the three others of torturing and killing Serb prisoners of war.

The panel also said it would hear evidence given by Agim Zogaj, a protected witness known as "X" who was found dead in an apparent suicide in a park in Germany during trial proceedings. The first court ruled his evidence inadmissible.

Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia in 2008, but Belgrade has vowed never to accept the secession.

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