

After Delays, Milosevic Opens Defense

Former Yugoslav Leader Shifts Blame for Atrocities

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THE HAGUE, Aug. 31 -- Former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic launched on Tuesday a defiant defense of his conduct during the Balkan wars, accusing his enemies of conspiracies against the Serbs and insisting that his countrymen acted in self-defense.

Beginning the long-delayed defense phase of his war crimes trial, Milosevic sought to shift blame for atrocities and portray the U.N. tribunal as part of a U.S.-supported plot to violently break up Yugoslavia in fighting that left more than 200,000 people dead.

Seated alone at the defense table, Milosevic spoke with his customary swagger and sarcasm. But at times his face reddened as he rushed to complete his statement in the allotted time, leaving interpreters breathless as they tried to keep up with his rapid Serbian.

"Accusations leveled against me are an unscrupulous lie and also a tireless distortion of history. Everything has been presented in a lopsided manner in order to protect those who are truly responsible," asserted Milosevic, a trained lawyer who is acting as his own defense counsel.

It was the first time he was allowed to speak without interruption since his trial began 2 1/2 years ago, and he signaled that he would mount a highly political rather than a legal defense.

He unleashed a stream of invective against those he held responsible for Serbia's torment: Croatia, which he accused of genocide against its Serb minority; the United States and Europe, which he said sought Yugoslavia's destruction; Muslim "terrorists" in Bosnia and Kosovo; and the Vatican, which he said sought supremacy in the Balkans over the Orthodox Church.

"They call themselves the 'international community,' but in the territory of Yugoslavia -- Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo -- they supported a totalitarian, chauvinist elite, terrorists, Islamic fundamentalists, neo-Nazis, whose objective was an ethnically pure state. That is to say, a state without any Serbs," he said.

He maintained that in the 1991 war in Croatia he came to the aid of ethnic Serbs who were under threat from an armed rebellion against Yugoslavia. Later in Bosnia, Muslim fighters came from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Lebanon and Morocco "to support the first Islamic state in Europe," Milosevic said. He said some of the foreign fighters bore arms supplied by the CIA for the war in Afghanistan.

Milosevic was extradited to U.N. authorities in The Hague by Serbia in June 2001. He faces 66 counts of war crimes allegedly committed in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo during the 1990s. He could be imprisoned for life if convicted on any charge.

Prosecutors accuse Milosevic of orchestrating or condoning murder, the destruction of towns and places of worship and the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of people in an effort to create an ethnically pure "greater Serbia."

Milosevic spent only a few minutes addressing the accusations against him. Instead, he aired his version of the wars.

Milosevic was to have opened his defense following the conclusion of the prosecution's case in February. But it was postponed five times as doctors warned that stress was raising his blood pressure to dangerous levels. "He is in a good mood because he has waited for more than three years for this moment," said Zdenko Tomanovic, one of Milosevic's legal aides.

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