

Croatian government crisis over extraditions to UN tribunal

Chris Marsden**11 July 2001**

Croatia was plunged into political turmoil following the decision of the Social Democratic Party-led government of Ivica Racan's to cooperate with The Hague war crimes tribunal and extradite two top military personnel to face trial.

Four ministers immediately tendered their resignation, all members of the Social Liberal Party (SLP), the Social Democratic Party's (SDP) junior partners in the centre-left coalition, including Deputy Prime Minister Goran Granic. The government may fall as a result. The SDP can only count on 69 votes in the 151-seat parliament, but needs 76 to survive. The nationalist parties will strenuously oppose any such extraditions, particularly the HDZ formerly led by the now deceased Franjo Tudjman.

Drazen Budisa, SLP leader, said The Hague's indictment contained "unacceptable" accusations: "The indictments carry genocide charges and claim that the Operation Storm was planned to ethnically cleanse 150,000 Serbs from Croatia."

Veterans' associations, the HDZ and other nationalist parties have threatened mass protests at the height of the tourist season, including a possible blockade of popular resorts on the Dalmatian coast. They organised massive demonstrations last year after a Croatian court issued a warrant for the arrest of retired general Mirko Norac on war crimes charges, including blockading the main road between the capital Zagreb and Split for five days. Norac was eventually tried for possible involvement in the killing of Serbian civilians in the town of Gospic in late 1991, but he only gave himself up after he had received a guarantee that he would not be extradited to the International War Crimes Tribunal (ICTY), which is currently preparing the trial of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic in The Hague.

ICTY chief prosecutor Carla del Ponte handed the Croatian government two sealed indictments on June 12. They are assumed to be in relation to retired general Ante Gotovina and General Rahim Ademi. On Saturday night, Racan announced that all those indicted would be handed over but said he was "afraid of unrest". In the past three years, Zagreb has extradited 12 Bosnian Croats to The Hague, but no Croatian citizens.

Racan rejected Granic's resignation and has said that General Ademi has agreed to the handover and will be helped by the government to prepare his defence. Nothing was said about

Gotovina.

Ademi Ademi is an ethnic Albanian from Kosovo. He was a Croat commander during an offensive against Serb forces in the Krajina. Serb villages were destroyed and dozens of civilians killed as Croatian forces retook the area in 1993 in a two-day operation. When the Croat forces withdrew and the United Nations took over, 80 Serb civilians were killed and 11 villages were set ablaze.

Fall-out from a trial of Gotovina could be more damning for Croatia, and is also extremely dangerous for the United States, due to its support for Croatia at the time Gotovina is alleged to have taken part in massacres of Serb civilians. During the August 1995 assault on the Krajina, known as Operation Storm, Croatia retook control of the area at a cost of 400 Serb civilian deaths, many elderly and infirm. In total, some 22,000 Serb homes were destroyed by arson or bombing, and over 150,000 Serbs were driven out of the Krajina to either Bosnia or Serbia.

An article in Britain's *Observer* newspaper on July 8 immediately drew attention to the possible implications for the US of any Gotovina trial in The Hague. The paper warned that it threatens "to lift the lid on one of the murkiest episodes of the Balkan wars: the secret arming of the Croats by the United States".

The report continued, "The history of US assistance to the nationalist regime of former President Franjo Tudjman dated back to March 1994 when the Croatian Defence Minister, Joko Susak, approached the Pentagon to ask for help with military training." Susak was directed towards a Virginia-based military consultancy firm, Military Professional Resource Inc (MPRI), which was staffed by former US generals, and whose main client was the US army. Subsequently the Pentagon endorsed a contract between MPRI and the Croatian army.

MPRI trained the Croatian army and is also widely believed to have been involved in the Krajina offensive. At the same time, according to the *Observer*, "the American Defense Intelligence Service and the CIA were building up their strength at the US embassy in Zagreb. Part of that operation, said sources at the time, was to provide the intelligence for the Croat assaults."

The *Observer*, like most of the liberal media at the time of the Bosnian war, gave its full support to the claims of the US and

other Western powers that their intervention in the Balkans was aimed at preventing ethnic cleansing by Serb forces. The equally horrific actions of America's Croatian allies were glossed over.

In its December 14 1995 statement *Imperialist war in the Balkans and the decay of the petty-bourgeois left*, the International Committee of the Fourth International exposed the hypocrisy of such claims and pointed to the actions taken by the US following Croatia's Krajina offensive:

"The Pax Americana in Bosnia is aimed at completing the process of ethnic partition which has already cost the lives of more than 200,000 people and turned millions more into refugees. By spearheading the introduction of imperialist troops into the Balkans for the first time since the defeat of Hitler's armies, the US is assuring the eruption of new and wider conflicts. The Clinton administration used military force, both US warplanes and Washington's proxy armies in the region, to create the conditions for this settlement. American air strikes last September involved 3,200 sorties, more than one ton of bombs and the firing of cruise missiles from US warships in the Adriatic. Towns and villages throughout Bosnia were targeted and many hundreds of civilians were killed and wounded.

"The immediate aim of these bombings was to inflict overwhelming damage on the telecommunications and transportation links of the Bosnian Serb army, allowing the regular army of Croatia, together with Bosnian Moslem and Croat forces, to overrun Serb regions in northwest Bosnia. This ground offensive killed and wounded thousands and turned another 125,000 people into refugees... In the space of two months the US oversaw the most massive acts of ethnic cleansing to occur in the entire course of the Bosnian civil war. Thus the stage was set for the US-brokered talks in Dayton, Ohio."

Ever since the end of the Bosnian war, the US has been plagued by fears that its role in sponsoring Croatian atrocities will be uncovered. The Hague tribunal has been a primary focus of US concerns on this question. While the US has insisted on confining prosecutions to Serbian or Bosnian Serb or Bosnian Croat war crimes, the tribunal has made repeated efforts to broaden its remit into Croatia proper. This conflict of emphasis appears to reflect simmering antagonisms between the US and the European powers over who controls the strategically vital Balkan region.

In April 1999, the *World Socialist Web Site* drew attention to The Hague's documentation of atrocities by Croatian forces in 1995. The ICTY's report accused the Croatian Army of carrying out summary executions, indiscriminate shelling of civilian populations and ethnic cleansing. It concluded: "In a widespread and systematic manner, Croatian troops committed murder and other inhumane acts upon and against Croatian Serbs."

The WSWS cited a March 21 report in the *New York Times*. This noted that The Hague's investigators had "concluded that

the Croatian Army carried out summary executions, indiscriminate shelling of civilian populations and 'ethnic cleansing' during a 1995 assault that was a turning point in the Balkan wars" and was recommending the indictment of three Croatian generals.

The *Times* stated that the Krajina offensive "was carried out with the tacit blessing of the United States by a Croatian army that had been schooled in part by a group of retired American military officers." It added, "In the course of a three-year investigation into the assault, the United States has failed to provide critical evidence requested by the tribunal, according to tribunal documents and officials, adding to suspicion among some there that Washington is uneasy about the investigation."

The *World Socialist Web Site* also drew attention to the account of Richard Holbrooke, who, in his capacity as US Ambassador to the UN, had held discussions with Croatian President Tudjman while the offensive was in progress and had encouraged Tudjman to pursue the military assault in the Krajina vigorously:

"Galbraith [the US ambassador to Croatia] and I saw Tudjman on September 14. Tudjman wanted clarification of the American position. He bluntly asked for my personal views. I indicated my general support for the offensive, but delayed a more detailed exchange for a second meeting so that I could discuss it with my colleagues and Washington.

"Galbraith and I met with Tudjman alone again on September 17 ... I told Tudjman the offensive had great value to the negotiations. It would be much easier to retain at the table what had been won on the battlefield than to get the Serbs to give up territory they had controlled for several years." Cited in *To End a War* (New York, 1998, pp. 159-60).

US relations established with Croatian military personnel at the time were to prove useful subsequently in Washington's equally underhand manoeuvres in Kosovo during and after the conflict with Serbia in 1999. America's stooge in that conflict was the ethnic Albanian separatists of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The man appointed as head of the KLA in May 1999 was the former Croatian Army Brigadier-General Agim Ceku. Ceku had played a central role in organising the Krajina offensive in 1995 and his appointment to lead the KLA was clearly made with US approval.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact