

April 24, 2003, Thursday

FOREIGN DESK

Mystery Witness Faces Milosevic

By MARLISE SIMONS (NYT) 1028 words

THE HAGUE, April 19 -- She was introduced as witness B129 and her voice was scrambled, her face hidden from public view. But the message she delivered to the war crimes tribunal here was plain: the most feared paramilitary leader of the Balkan wars took his orders, and his money, directly from the secret police run by Slobodan Milosevic, the former Serbian leader.

B129 was a secretary to Zeljko Raznatovic, better known as Arkan, whose ties to Mr. Milosevic were always suspected, but unproved, even after he was shot dead in a Belgrade hotel three years ago.

At the Belgrade headquarters of Mr. Raznatovic, B129 said, she took phone calls from his commanders, paid the men of his militia, came across his extensive smuggling operations and learned how he regularly seized Red Cross supplies.

Above all, her testimony showed, she learned a good deal about the inner workings of the Serbian machine that waged war in the 1990's, first on Croatia, then on Bosnia.

Mr. Milosevic, on trial for war crimes and genocide in a conflict that took more than 200,000 lives, steadfastly maintains in court that he cannot be held accountable for actions by Serbs outside Serbia, and that his government had no links with soldiers and paramilitary fighters who expelled and killed millions of non-Serbs in a vicious land grab.

The best organized of the paramilitaries was Mr. Raznatovic's group, known as the Serbian National Guard, or the Tigers.

In two days of testimony last Wednesday and Thursday, some of it closed and interrupted in part by a power shortage that delayed transcripts, the former secretary described how Mr. Raznatovic and his men operated under the direct command of Mr. Milosevic's chiefs of state security, or secret police, Jovica Stanisic and Franko Simatovic.

Both men have now been detained as part of a huge roundup in Serbia that has followed the assassination last month of the prime minister, Zoran Djindjic, a longtime opponent of Mr. Milosevic. Whether either will ever face charges before The Hague tribunal, or indeed in Serbia, however, is not clear.

Arkan often went to see them, B129 said, and radio and telephone contacts were also frequent.

"We had two numbers to call Frenki," she said, using Mr. Simatovic's nickname. The Tigers could not act without official instructions. "Arkan always said that without orders from the state security, the Tigers never went anywhere," she told the court.

The witness, unnamed to protect her identity, said she got her job with Mr. Raznatovic in 1994 and learned of earlier events in the 1991-95 war from men wounded in action who were working at the headquarters. Veterans told her that a small group were the first to swear allegiance to the Tigers on Oct. 11, 1990, at the Pokajnica monastery near Belgrade.

At the Tigers camp in Erdut, in Slavonia, which she visited, discipline was strict, with fighters banned from drinking alcohol, she said. She said she saw one militiaman who had been caught drinking being punished in public with 100 lashes.

The Erdut camp, at different times, had up to 1,000 men. They used two types of uniforms, green in the daytime, black clothes and ski masks at night, she said.

The Yugoslav Army, she said, supplied the Tigers with weapons and gasoline. They were often told to contact Gen. Dusan Loncar, who at the time was in charge of eastern Slavonia, "because he supplied us with weapons, fuel and part of the money," she said.

Other funds, mostly cash, were often sent from the office of the state security chief, Mr. Stanisic, she said, adding that sometimes an officer from the Tigers or Arkan himself would go there and collect the money.

There was extra pay for special operations, B129 said. In 1995, for example, she said, some 200 Tigers were called as reinforcements to Banja Luka, a Serb-held city in northern Bosnia. Many Bosnian Serb soldiers had deserted in the city, which had been brutally cleared of almost all Muslims and Croats during the war. Money from the state security office to pay the Tigers for the operation was delivered about 10 times, adding up to about four million German marks (about \$2.5 million at the time), the witness said. She and a few others at headquarters had to count it.

Some of the money was used to pay the fighters and some was locked in Arkan's private safe, she said. It was up to her to put the money in envelopes to make sure the fighters got paid, she said.

There were other sources of funds, she said, including contributions from wealthy businessmen and from other members of the Milosevic government, like the head of customs, Mihalj Kertes, who was a close ally of Mr. Milosevic.

Some funds, she said, came from Mr. Raznatovic's smuggling of alcohol, tobacco and other goods while Serbia was under economic penalties for its part in the Balkan wars. If his trucks ran into trouble at the border, the witness said, Mr. Raznatovic would call Mr. Kertes, who would solve the problem.

Despite their close links, relations between Arkan and his state security friends were uneasy. After one operation in Bosnia, when 16 Tigers were killed by Muslim troops, the witness said, Mr. Simatovic came to their headquarters. She heard him scoff that Mr. Raznatovic knew nothing about leading soldiers into battle.

Cross-examining her, Mr. Milosevic asked how she had remembered so many details. The witness recalled that she had attended the funerals of 12 Tigers.

"If you had worked over there, you would have remembered things your entire life," she told Mr. Milosevic. "To bury 12 young men who were fighting for the Serbian people was very difficult. That is why I wanted to speak out, because it appears that the war boiled down to smuggling and that those young men died for no reason whatsoever."

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