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## **Serb in Court in The Hague, Playing to a TV Audience at Home**

By MARLISE SIMONS

Vojislav Seselj, one of Serbia's most hard-line and most articulate nationalists, appeared at the United Nations tribunal in The Hague yesterday to answer charges that he ran a band of volunteer fighters that killed and robbed non-Serbs during the Balkan wars of the 1990's.

With the abrasive style that first saw him jailed under the Communists in Yugoslavia, Mr. Seselj, who drew thousands of supporters onto the streets of Belgrade before he turned himself in to the tribunal this week, presented himself as a victim, rather than perpetrator, of the wars, and listed several objections.

First, he told the judge, "I have been physically tortured and mistreated this morning" because he had been forced to wear a thick 45-pound flak jacket on the way from his cell to court.

"I had to crawl into the vehicle," he said. "I consider this to be intolerable."

Further, he said, clearly playing to a nationalist audience at home that can follow tribunal proceedings on television, he could not enter a plea of guilty or not guilty because in the Serbian language version of the indictment there were several Croatian words he could not understand. The two languages are considered almost interchangeable, but Croats made a conscious attempt to alter words after they declared independence in 1991.

The most unusual of his objections was his distaste for the red robes and black gowns that are the normal attire of the United Nations war crimes tribunal.

In Serbia, he said, people in court wear civilian clothes. "I feel frustrated with judges in strange clothing," he said. "They remind me of the Inquisition of the Roman Catholic Church."

This was another indirect play to the audience in Serbia, where the main religion is Orthodox, as opposed to the Roman Catholicism that predominates in Croatia.

Judge Wolfgang Schomburg, a German, calmly explained the customs and rules of the tribunal, and suggested that Mr. Seselj, who was trained as a lawyer, should appoint a defense counsel. Mr. Seselj, 48, who came second in Serbian presidential elections in December with one-third of the votes cast, said he would act as his own lawyer.

A reporter from The Associated Press traveled from Belgrade with Mr. Seselj, who told the journalist that he was surrendering to the court to "defend the dignity of my 10,000 fighters who fought gallantly during the wars." He said he was going voluntarily "to prove my people's innocence" and "to destroy the evil tribunal, an American instrument against the Serbs."

Mr. Seselj's paramilitary troops became known in the early 1990's for their violent role in driving non-Serbs from lands, first in Croatia and then in Bosnia, which he and other Serb leaders like former president Slobodan Milosevic, who is also on trial at the tribunal, wanted to annex into an ethnic Serb area.

Mr. Seselj's indictment charges him with eight counts of crimes against humanity and six counts of war crimes, including persecution, torture, killing and destruction of homes and mosques.

The full indictment was read out in court today at Mr. Seselj's request. The reading took close to three hours; at the end, the clerk enumerated a seemingly interminable list of individual names, said to be the victims of Mr. Seselj's fighters. The accused listened in silence, apparently unmoved.