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In a Startling Plea, a Serbian Policeman Confesses to Atrocities

By MARLISE SIMONS

THE HAGUE, July 25 — A Serbian policeman startled the United Nations war crimes tribunal this week by abruptly pleading guilty to taking part in the massacre of more than 200 prisoners of war in Bosnia.

The event of August 21, 1992, during the Bosnian war, was notorious: Serbian soldiers and police officers separated more than 200 men, mostly Croats and Muslims, from a convoy of civilians. They told the men, taken from the Trnopolje detention camp, that they would be released in a prisoner exchange. Instead, the forces took their captives to a wooded ravine, told them to kneel on the edge of a cliff, and shot them.

Darko Mrdja, the commander of a special police unit, admitted in court to playing a part in the event. He pleaded guilty to murder and attempted murder. His confession came unexpectedly in a hastily scheduled hearing on Thursday after he had spent more than a year at the jail of the war crimes tribunal.

Remarkably, it was the tribunal's fourth guilty plea of the past two months — the ninth in total — a development welcomed at the court, which is dealing with crimes from the Yugoslavian wars of the 1990's.

No one here uses the phrase "plea bargaining," and spokesmen reiterate that statutes do not include provisions for such deal making. But negotiations between prosecutors and defense lawyers now appear to be quietly encouraged at a court that is busier than ever with 53 detainees and six trials in progress and where officials are facing strong Western pressure to conclude their work.

"A guilty plea obviously saves valuable resources because it avoids long trials and appeals," said Judith Armatta, a lawyer for the Coalition for International Justice who closely follows the proceedings. "It also saves trauma for the victims because some are asked to testify more than once about the same event in different trials."

What is as valuable to prosecutors is that some, though not all, of those who have entered guilty pleas have agreed to testify against others. Among them are two officers in the Bosnian Serb Army who admitted they helped plan the Srebrenica massacre of 1995, in which more than 7,000 unarmed men and boys were executed.

Specialists see several reasons for the increase in guilty pleas. One may be a snowball effect felt by defendants who see others receiving reduced sentences and avoiding long, grueling trials in exchange for their admissions. Another, they say, is the growing perception in the former Yugoslavia that the tribunal is not the anti-Serb or anti-Croat

kangaroo court critics had made it out to be, but a place to receive a fair trial. Not least, some people believe, is the effect of Serbia's own recent crackdown against former police officers and the announcement in Serbia that it intends to try some lower-ranking war criminals in its own courts.

At The Hague, at least two detainees, one of whom has pleaded guilty, told court officials they preferred to be tried in The Hague once they learned they risked prosecution at home.

Tribunal officials say they hope the admissions of guilt — and in some cases the outright expressions of remorse — will help reconciliation in the Balkans, where reaction has been mixed.

"Of course, it is up to the victims to decide if they believe the remorse is genuine or if they just see this as deal making," said Heikelina Verriijn-Stuart, a lawyer following the tribunal.