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Prosecutor Says No. 1 War Crimes Suspect Is Hiding in Belgrade

By NICHOLAS WOOD

Correction Appended

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Feb. 11 — The United Nations chief war crimes prosecutor said Wednesday that the leading Bosnian Serb war crimes suspect, Dr. Radovan Karadzic, is hiding in Belgrade, the Serbian capital.

Serbian officials immediately dismissed the assertion.

Speaking to reporters in Brussels, the prosecutor, Carla Del Ponte, said she had "received just last week information from a credible source that even Karadzic is now in Belgrade." She added that cooperation between the Serbian government and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in tracking down fugitives was "frozen."

It was the first time a senior tribunal official has said that Dr. Karadzic was in Belgrade. The former Bosnian Serb leader has been charged by the tribunal in The Hague with committing genocide and crimes against humanity during the 1992-95 conflict in Bosnia. But despite the presence of thousands of NATO-led peacekeepers in Bosnia, he has eluded arrest.

Officials from the tribunal have long maintained that another leading war crimes suspect, Ratko Mladic, the former commander of the Bosnian Serb Army, was hiding in Serbia. Dr. Karadzic's whereabouts have proved more elusive. Tribunal officials have suggested that he has moved between southern Bosnia and neighboring Montenegro in order to avoid arrest.

Last week, Ms. Del Ponte said that an operation by NATO-led troops on Jan. 10 to capture Dr. Karadzic in the town of Pale, near Sarajevo, had missed the fugitive "by two hours."

At the news conference on Wednesday, she charged that Belgrade "is now a safe haven for our fugitives."

"We have around 15 fugitives who are in Serbia," she added.

At a meeting later in the day, Ms. Del Ponte repeated her comments to NATO's secretary general, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, a NATO spokesman said. The spokesman, James Appathurai, said increased activity by the alliance in Bosnia could have prompted Dr. Karadzic to seek refuge elsewhere.

With NATO "intensifying its efforts to track down people indicted for war crimes, Bosnia is becoming an inhospitable environment," he said by telephone from Brussels.

Serbia's prime minister, Zoran Zivkovic, said, "Her statements are nothing new or unexpected," the state news agency Beta reported. "She has been saying the same or similar things for years, but so far she has not provided any information that could help arrest the indictees."

Ms. Del Ponte's assertion comes as Congress is scheduled to consider annual United States aid worth about \$100 million to Serbia, which is conditional on the government's cooperation with the tribunal. A decision is expected next month.

Serbia cooperated with the tribunal after the fall of the former Yugoslav president, Slobodan Milosevic, in 2000, handing him over to the tribunal for trial the next year. Since then, however, relations with the tribunal have soured, and Serbia's government has refused to hand over other war crimes suspects.

Many Serbian politicians accuse tribunal officials of stirring up nationalist sentiment and complicating parliamentary elections by charging four leading police and military officers last year with having committed war crimes in Kosovo in 1999, just ahead of the polls.

Correction: Feb. 13, 2004, Friday

An article yesterday about assertions by the chief United Nations prosecutor for war crimes that the leading Bosnian Serb suspect, Dr. Radovan Karadzic, was hiding in Belgrade referred incorrectly to Beta, the news agency that reported the Serbian government's denial. The agency is private, not state-owned.