

4 Top Rebels Convicted Of Kosovo Atrocities

By Garentina Kraja
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PRISTINA, Serbia and Montenegro, July 16 -- A U.N.-administered court convicted and sentenced four ethnic Albanians to prison today for atrocities they committed as senior rebel commanders during their 1998-99 war against Yugoslav forces in Kosovo.

It was the first time that the court had convicted anyone from the rebel side of war crimes in the conflict.

A panel of three judges sentenced Rustem "Remi" Mustafa and three associates to prison terms ranging from five years to 17 years for ordering the killings, illegal arrests and torture of fellow ethnic Albanians suspected of collaborating with the Serb-dominated government of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic.

"In the case of each accused, these acts are qualified as the offense of war crimes," said the presiding judge, Timothy Clayson of Britain. "No man is above the law."

An attorney for the men said they would appeal.

Kosovo, formerly a province of Serbia, is part of Serbia and Montenegro, the successor state to Yugoslavia. Serbia was the dominant Yugoslav republic. Kosovo has been administered by the United Nations since 1999, when a U.S.-led NATO bombing campaign forced an end to a Serb crackdown on an ethnic Albanian separatist movement.

The four senior rebels, using headphones to hear a translation of the judge's words, listened in silence as the sentences were read.

Many ethnic Albanians in Kosovo believe the rebels to be heroes in a war of liberation. In the Kosovo town of Podujevo, supporters protested peacefully after today's convictions.

Mustafa, one of the senior commanders of the now-defunct Kosovo Liberation Army, a rebel militia group, received a 17-year sentence for ordering the killings of five ethnic Albanians, failing to prevent illegal detention and failing to punish rebel fighters responsible for abuses.

Mustafa commanded the rebels in an area known as Llap in northern Kosovo. The three associates served under his command.

Nazif Mehmeti, the head of the rebels' police unit, was sentenced to 13 years for conveying orders to kill civilians and making unlawful arrests. The rebels' intelligence

chief, Latif Gashi, was sentenced to 10 years for illegal detention and torture. Naim Kadriu, who headed the rebels' detention center, received a five-year sentence.

Relatives of the men sobbed as the sentences were announced. Mustafa tried to calm them as heavily armed guards escorted him out of the temporary courtroom. "We fought for ourselves, not for them," he said, referring to the U.N. mission now in charge of the province.

Gashi's sister, Nafije, said the trial was unfair. "They fought for their own people, for their own country, and we will always be proud of what they did," she said.

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