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Prosecutors Open Genocide Case Against Milosevic

By REUTERS

THE HAGUE (Reuters) - Slobodan Milosevic insisted on Thursday he was a tireless peacemaker and dismissed the gravest charge against him, genocide, as U.N. prosecutors opened the Bosnia and Croatia phase of his trial.

Alleging Europe's worst human rights violations since World War II, prosecutors outlined 61 charges against the ex-Yugoslav president in this stage of the biggest international war crimes trial in Europe since Hitler's henchmen were tried at Nuremberg.

Milosevic argued that Serbs simply defended themselves in the Bosnian and Croatian conflicts and were themselves genocide victims as Western powers engineered the breakup of Yugoslavia.

"I invested all my power in achieving peace. Serbia and myself deserve recognition for working for peace in the area and not being a protagonist of war," said Milosevic, 61.

But prosecutors, who say he masterminded a grand plan to create an ethnically pure Greater Serbia, told the court they would present evidence showing Milosevic was "confronted in the strongest terms" with atrocities by Serbs.

"The systematic and organized way in which attacks against non-Serb civilian populations in Croatia were carried out revealed a carefully designed scheme and strategy within an overall plan that may be laid at the door of this accused," said prosecutor Geoffrey Nice.

Prosecutors at the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia closed their case two weeks ago on Kosovo, where Milosevic and former aides are accused of expelling almost one third of the Albanian population from the Serbian province.

Milosevic was Yugoslav leader during the Kosovo conflict, but experts say convicting him for the Bosnian and Croatian conflicts, when he was Serbian leader, will be tough.

"COUNTLESS ACTS OF ETHNIC CLEANSING"

Nice displayed a map illustrating the demographic effects of Serb ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. "A tidy map, bought by thousands of killings, innumerable acts of inhumanity, and countless acts of ethnic cleansing," he called it.

The 43-month siege of Sarajevo, the Srebrenica massacre, killings after the emptying of Croatia's Vukovar hospital -- prosecutors cataloged atrocities that shocked the world during Milosevic's 1990-97 strongman reign as Serbian president.

Though Milosevic publicly opposed the siege of Sarajevo, the Bosnian Serb forces responsible were in the pay of a Yugoslav army over which he wielded great influence, they said.

Milosevic was also linked to the notorious 1995 Srebrenica massacre because of the involvement of Serbian interior ministry police there, Nice said.

The Bosnia and Croatia indictments cover 1991-5, predating the Kosovo indictment's 1999 remit. They boast every crime on the Hague tribunal's statute, including genocide in Bosnia.

Milosevic's opening speech repeated now familiar attacks on indictments he called false and a court he condemned as illegal.

The first head of state ever to be indicted for such crimes while in office refused to plead when he was sent to The Hague in 2001 and judges entered not guilty pleas on his behalf.

Milosevic insisted Serbia simply helped Serbs in what he termed civil wars in Yugoslavia. He said the Vatican gave Croats money for arms and asked why that was not seen as a crime.

“As Serbs helped Serbia I am a criminal, but the Vatican helped Croats to secede by violent means but the Pope remains the Holy Father,” he said to laughter from the public gallery.

NO SMOKING GUN

Prosecutor Nice warned not to expect smoking guns, or a star witness whose evidence alone would convict Milosevic:

“All (the) witnesses will provide differing shafts of light...but it is unlikely there will be an individual who will be able to tell the whole truth about this man.”

Witnesses will include former members of Milosevic's inner circle, such as ex-Yugoslav president Zoran Lilic, military commanders and international figures, Nice said.

“Each will be able to provide a small view of the accused. It is the composition of those views that in due course will establish the guilt of this man.”

Milosevic operated in a “curiously empty room,” dealing with people on a one-to-one basis so they would not know what was being said to others, Nice told the three-judge bench.

“Politicians that do acts that are or are subsequently revealed as being criminal, don't leave traces behind them. They don't leave paper trails,” he said.

Chief Prosecutor Carla Del Ponte opened Thursday's proceedings by lamenting Yugoslavia's “fractious, difficult and unpredictable” cooperation with the Hague war crimes tribunal.

Del Ponte said Yugoslavia was obstructing appearances by prosecution witnesses and denying access to archives despite “holding the key to irreplaceable elements of evidence.”

Prosecutors plan to call 106 witnesses on Bosnia and 71 for Croatia, versus the 124 in open court for Kosovo. Croatian President Stjepan Mesic will testify next week, Nice said.

Croatia is currently at loggerheads with the tribunal over an indictment for wartime chief of staff General Janko Bobetko, whom Zagreb refuses to send to The Hague despite U.N. calls.

The prominent witness many are awaiting is former U.S. ambassador Richard Holbrooke. This key negotiator of the 1995 Bosnia peace accord has said he is willing to testify but Washington has long sparred with U.N. prosecutors over whether he will be heard in closed or open session.

In what observers read as a clear call to Washington, Del Ponte said witnesses should be heard publicly whenever possible, since ``administration of justice must be transparent."