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Serbia Cracks Down on Mobsters and War-Crime Suspects

By PETER S. GREEN

BELGRADE, Serbia, April 18 — Almost every day, the evening news here shows Serbian officials announcing more arrests of gangsters and criminals, with the police confiscating arms and counterfeit cash, and often arresting a complicitous policeman or two.

A month after Serbia's 50-year-old reformist prime minister, Zoran Djindjic, was assassinated, the government is attacking the crime gangs and accused war criminals who held this country of 7.5 million people in their thrall, worked hand in glove with the police and secret services and were the backbone of Slobodan Milosevic's murderous decade of dictatorship.

Under a state of emergency imposed since the assassination of Mr. Djindjic on March 12, the police have questioned more than 7,000 people, and more than 2,000 suspected members of what Serbs like to call the mafia are now in prisons.

Milorad Lukovic, who is believed to lead the Zemun crime clan and is suspected of ordering the assassination of Mr. Djindjic, is on the run. Dusan Spasojevic and Mile Lukovic, two other suspected Zemun clan leaders, were killed by the police in a shootout last month.

The dragnet has also swept up some of the most notorious figures from the Milosevic era, including top army and security officials and others accused of war crimes.

"Every state has its mafia," Justice Minister Vladan Batic said in an interview, "but we had the problem in Serbia that the mafia wanted to have its own state."

Dismantling the mafia state will not be easy. Mr. Lukovic, better known as Legija, was not only the head of Belgrade's most powerful crime group, he was also a former leader of the Red Berets, which began life as a paramilitary band that carried out ethnic cleansing and murder for Mr. Milosevic, and became an official special forces unit. The Red Berets' deputy chief, Zvezdan Jovanovic, who was arrested two weeks after the killing, has confessed to shooting Mr. Djindjic.

The new prime minister, Zoran Zivkovic, recently asked his cabinet why some ministers had been seen in the company of known mobsters. And earlier this week, the police arrested two close allies of Vojislav Kostunica, Mr. Milosevic's successor and Yugoslavia's first democratically elected president, accusing them of links to Mr. Djindjic's killers.

Critics say that focusing on organized crime distracts the public from Serbia's real problem — the continued impunity of those accused of war crimes. Not a single senior official of the Milosevic era has been tried in Serbia for war crimes, and most observers say that Mr. Djindjic was killed not because he wanted to crack down on mobsters, but because he was ready to send more war crimes suspects to face trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague.

"Zoran Djindjic was not killed by organized criminals, but by war criminals," said Veran Matic, the editor in chief of B 92, an independent radio station in Belgrade. The problem, he said, was that after the violent protests that ousted Mr. Milosevic and confirmed Mr. Kostunica's election on Oct. 5, 2000, the war crimes suspects were spared and the authorities let their longtime civilian criminal activities continue.

Mr. Kostunica and Mr. Djindjic both apparently worked with the Red Berets and other war crimes suspects to oust Mr. Milosevic and avoid a potential civil war.

Mr. Kostunica, who kept Milosevic allies in place after taking power, blamed what he called "the Hague factor" for Mr. Djindjic's death.

"Different sorts of promises might have been given to these people who were expected to be indicted than the promises made to The Hague itself," Mr. Kostunica said in an interview.

Critics of the government — and even some of its supporters — also worry that the current crackdown is becoming a political vendetta, focusing on Mr. Kostunica, who was Mr. Djindjic's strongest political rival and who fell out with him over cooperation with The Hague. Mr. Djindjic's advisers say that today Mr. Kostunica's brand of patriotism is more an apology for war crimes.

The government has pledged to lift the state of emergency by Friday, but has also moved to toughen some crime-fighting laws. Parliament has passed a package of laws to lengthen prison terms and let the police keep mob suspects in custody for 60 days without pressing charges.

"Arresting 7,000 people can't simply be in connection with the killing of the prime minister and the so-called Zemun clan," said Natasa Kandic, a human rights lawyer. "I support the struggle against criminals, but it must be based on the law."

The real problem, though, will be persuading Serbs to face up to the war crimes committed in their name. So far, the government has painted the deportations of war crimes suspects as a necessary evil. Mr. Milosevic, for instance, was sent to The Hague by Mr. Djindjic only when American officials threatened to withhold \$30 million in aid.

"All those people who were indicted," said Toma Fila, a lawyer who once represented Mr. Milosevic, "the people here think they were betrayed and sold out."

"Unless people here understand that it is necessary and normal," for war criminals to face justice, he added, "nothing will be solved."

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