

October 6, 2006

Yugoslav War Crimes Tribunal Prosecutor Warns Key Suspects Could Avoid Justice

By The Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — The chief prosecutor of the Yugoslav war crimes tribunal warned on Friday that key suspects in Balkan war atrocities could escape justice if the international community does not continue to support her court.

The U.N. tribunal is being pressured by the U.N. Security Council to wrap up all trials by 2008 and finish work on appeals two years later, but with six major suspects - including wartime Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic and military chief Gen. Ratko Mladic - still on the run, it seems certain some trials will last beyond those dates if they start at all.

Speaking at a meeting of international war crimes prosecutors in The Hague, Carla Del Ponte said a plan is urgently needed to ensure that trials can continue. More than two dozen people are on trial at the tribunal in cases expected to last months, if not years.

She said political pressure to wrap up proceedings is likely to make way for financial pressure next year.

The U.N. funds the court and can cut back its multimillion dollar budget, possibly instead urging member states to make voluntary contributions outside the U.N. budget to keep the court running.

"The completion strategy was never intended to foster impunity for those accused of genocide and other most serious crimes," she said.

"If we do not devise today substantial measures for the task of the ICTY to be completed, this is exactly what will happen," she added. "I trust the international community cannot tolerate such a blatant breach of its principles and commitments. The victims of the Balkan wars do not deserve to be betrayed once more."

She said having Karadzic and Mladic stand trial in either Serbia or Bosnia, where they are regarded as heroes by some, instead of The Hague would be "absolutely unimaginable."

Del Ponte said that so far bringing war criminals from the former Yugoslavia to justice had failed to foster reconciliation.

"In truth, I ... see no signs of reconciliation," she said. "Not in Bosnia, not in Croatia. It's true that they are living now a little bit in peace together but they are ready to start again fighting."

Mladic and possibly also Karadzic are believed to be hiding in Serbia. Officials in Belgrade, under pressure from the European Union to hand over war crimes suspects, insist they are doing all they can to arrest them.

The tribunal has been under fire for taking too long to bring suspects to justice in the aftermath of the death in March of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic whose four-year trial was aborted after he died of a heart attack in his U.N. cell.

Del Ponte said her prosecutors are working with tribunal judges and defense attorneys to streamline trials.

But catching fugitives without their own police force remains a problem.

Hassan Jallow, chief prosecutor of the Rwanda Tribunal, which has the same planned finishing dates as its Yugoslav counterpart and still has 18 indicted suspects on the run, said the courts are at the mercy of the international community that established them.

"We continue to be dependent on the issue of state cooperation and that is almost an Achilles heel for us. We are dependent in terms of arresting fugitives, in terms of tracing witnesses," he told the meeting, that also featured prosecutors from the International Criminal Court and specials courts in Sierra Leone and Cambodia.

Robert Petit, co-prosecutor of the U.N.-backed Cambodia court, which has not yet indicted any Khmer Rouge suspects, said it was "safe to assume that next year we will have trials start" but did not say who the first suspect could be.

The brutal communist policies of the Khmer Rouge when in power in Cambodia in 1975-79 caused the death of some 1.7 million people from starvation, disease, overwork and execution. The tyrant who oversaw the regime, Pol Pot, died in 1998 and Ta Mok, the former Khmer Rouge army chief, died in July. Neither man was ever put on trial.