

WORLD

Croatian General Plans to Surrender To Hague Tribunal

By PHILIP SHENON MARCH 31, 1996

The Croatian Government announced today that a Bosnian Croat general charged with involvement in the killing of hundreds of Muslim civilians would turn himself in to international prosecutors on Monday. The move was described by visiting American officials as an important step forward in bringing war criminals in the Balkan conflict to justice.

The suspect, Gen. Tihomir Blaskic, is the only Bosnian Croat officer under indictment by the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague. The extradition of such a high-level suspect could signal a new willingness by Croatia to cooperate with the tribunal.

The timing for his surrender was announced after meetings today between Croatian leaders and Defense Secretary William J. Perry, who had warned that international financial and military aid to Croatia was threatened by the reluctance of its Government to cooperate with the war crimes tribunal.

The Croatian Government, which had been promising for weeks that General Blaskic would be turned over to the prosecutors, insisted that he was not being sent against his will. "He has volunteered himself to go to the Hague tribunal," the

Croatian President, Franjo Tudjman, said after meeting with Mr. Perry.

But American officials said that General Blaskic was actually under house arrest in Zagreb, the Croatian capital, and that he was being ordered to surrender, apparently in response to pressure on the Croatian Government by the United States and other countries.

"He's being pushed onto that plane," said an American official here.

The general was indicted by the tribunal in November for crimes against humanity for killings during vicious fighting between Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Muslim forces in 1993 and 1994. He is accused of commanding troops that rampaged through at least 14 towns in the Lasva Valley in central Bosnia, near Vitez, killing hundreds of Muslims and torching their houses.

The Croatian move will almost certainly step up the pressure on the Serbs and the Bosnian Muslims to cooperate with the tribunal, which has so far arrested only 5 of the 57 people it has indicted for war crimes committed in the Balkan civil war.

Seven Bosnian Croat civilians, most of them believed to be living in Croatia, are among those indicted by the tribunal.

The Croatian Government insists that it wants to cooperate with the tribunal but that it cannot act against the suspects until its Parliament approves a new law allowing for the extraditions. General Blaskic was presented as an exception because he had supposedly volunteered to give himself up.

In meetings this month in Geneva with Secretary of State Warren Christopher, Mr. Tudjman tentatively agreed to the transfer of General Blaskic to The Hague.

But the agreement appeared to unravel last week, with the general insisting that he would give himself up only if prosecutors agreed to place him under house arrest in The Hague -- instead of in a jail cell -- and allowed him complete

freedom of contact with his family and lawyers.

At the Geneva meeting, the Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic, promised to hand over two Bosnian Serbs -- Drazen Erdemovic and Radoslav Kremenovic -- who are wanted for questioning in the killing of some 1,200 Muslims in Srebrenica.

The two men were handed over to the tribunal in The Hague today but have yet to be indicted by the war crimes tribunal, which allowed Mr. Milosevic to claim in Geneva that he was not establishing a precedent of handing over indicted Serbs. They may be indicted after questioning.

Mr. Erdemovic and Mr. Kremenovic are former troopers in the Bosnian Serb army who told the French newspaper Le Figaro that they took part in the reported killings of civilians at Srebrenica in July 1995.

In discussing why General Blaskic had agreed to face his accusers, President Tudjman said, "There has been some slight confusion because his attorney has tried to delay things."

The Croatian leader insisted that whatever legal ruckus involving General Blaskic took place last week, "the Republic of Croatia remains committed to full cooperation with the Hague tribunal."

Whatever his public assurances, Mr. Tudjman and his deputies had until today seemed no more enthusiastic about working with the war crimes tribunal than their counterparts in Serbia and leaders of the Bosnian Serbs have.

Several of the suspects indicted by the tribunal -- most notably the Bosnian Serb military leader, Gen. Ratko Mladic -- are considered freedom-fighting heroes by their followers. Of the 57 people indicted so far, 46 are Serbs. Similarly, many Croats consider General Blaskic a hero in the cause of Croatian nationalism.

But outside pressure, especially economic and military pressure from the United States, may be forcing the Serbs and the Croats to cooperate with the tribunal after months of waffling.

Mr. Perry told reporters today that the Croats "must turn over indicted war criminals" and that without full cooperation with the tribunal, they risked the loss of American financial and military assistance, as well as American support for Croatia's application to a NATO's program intended to be the first step toward full NATO membership.

Mr. Perry's trip to the Balkans -- first to Croatia and then to Bosnia -- is aimed largely at bolstering the fragile Bosnian Federation that anchors the Dayton peace agreement. Meeting with reporters aboard his Air Force plane, the Defense Secretary dismissed suggestions that the federation was collapsing.

"It is not unraveling," he said. "But it is not working as well as we would like either, and we would like both the Bosnian Government and the Croatian Government to put maximum efforts and maximum pressure behind making this federation work."

Mr. Perry said he would warn officials on all sides that the American-led NATO peacekeeping forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina would move to shut down illegal checkpoints that have appeared with worrying frequency in recent weeks. Many have been set up by Croatian or Muslim militias to extort money from refugees.

The peacekeepers "will fan out all over the country, and any place they come across a checkpoint, they are going to knock it out, and they are not going to be polite about the way they knock it out," he said. He added that they "will have zero tolerance for units that try to stop freedom of movement in the country."