

U.S. Getting Tougher on Serbia

By Chris Stephen | October 29, 2003

With three little words, the United States Senate has set itself on what seems to be a collision course with Belgrade over the surrender of The Hague's most wanted man. The fateful words—"including Ratko Mladic"—appear tucked away inside a financing bill for American aid to Serbia.

If, as seems probable, the bill becomes law, Belgrade will have to choose between holding onto General Mladic, the former head of the Bosnian Serb army who is one of the men The Hague tribunal wants to put on trial, and getting aid money for its shattered economy.

The Senate bill does not come in isolation. Last weekend, Secretary of State Colin Powell demanded action in handing over both Mladic and the former Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadzic. And U.S. war crimes ambassador Pierre-Richard Prosper, visiting the Bosnian Serb capital Banja Luka, announced a U.S. \$5 million bounty for anyone bringing Karadzic in, though of course "dead or alive" does not apply—The Hague needs him alive. Meanwhile NATO troops and Hague investigators have launched 11 armed raids across Republika Srpska to grab documents needed for prosecutions.

All this followed last week's annual reports by Hague president Judge Theodor Meron and Chief Prosecutor Carla Del Ponte, cataloguing their continuing cooperation problems with Belgrade and Zagreb. Now, according to Del Ponte, Serbia is not just refusing to cooperate, but threatening to withdraw support.

The key issue exercising American minds is that the court is supposed to close in 2010—but it cannot close if all the cases are not finished. And those cases will not be finished until all indictees have been brought in. In 2001, Congress agreed to give Belgrade's new democratic government more time to arrest suspects. And in 2002, it agreed to give it more time.

Earlier this year, yet more time was given after the shock assassination of Zoran Djindjic, the prime

minister who had bravely engineered the arrest of Milosevic. But now the waiting time appears to be almost over, with the Senate bill expected to become law sometime in the next few weeks. For Serbia, it means losing not just U.S. aid, but possibly also funding from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Meanwhile, Croatia is facing a different fate—its refusal to hand over key suspect Ante Gotovina could mean that the European Union blocks its entry to the early stages of membership talks.

Both nations have similar problems. Fragile governments are worried that arresting generals who are popular figures will trigger a nationalist backlash.

Then there is the problem of finding these men. Right now, Hague officials think that the whereabouts of Gotovina and Mladic are known—the former is rumored to be living on a yacht in Croatian territory, and the Serb general in the town of Valjevo, in central Serbia. But if their respective governments decide to arrest them, both could slip away. Karadzic has remained free in Bosnia for eight years despite being hunted by the world's most powerful military alliance.

One thing is certain—America has lost patience, and wants to see the remaining war crimes suspects rounded up. Belgrade and Zagreb have run out of time.

(Chris Stephen is the Institute for War Peace Reporting's (www.iwpr.net) project manager in The Hague. This is reprinted with permission by Foreign Policy in Focus ([online at www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org)).



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