

**DEMOCRACY IN CROATIA? -- (BY CHRIS HEDGES) (Extension of Remarks
- March 16, 1998)**

[Page: E375]

HON. EDOLPHUS TOWNS

in the House of Representatives

MONDAY, MARCH 16, 1998

- Mr. TOWNS. Mr. Speaker, I rise to share with my colleagues an informative newspaper article revealing the unfortunate lack of progress towards democratic and human rights in Croatia (documented recently in the State Department's Country Report). I also want to express my deep sympathy and support for the citizens of this Republic who voted for democracy nearly eight years ago. The people of Croatia were right in wanting to join other democratic nations by implementing democratic reforms that would bring them more freedom and better lives for their families. It is unfortunate, that the ruling party and its leader, President Tudjman, maintain an authoritarian grip that stifles these dreams. One has only to look at Croatia's neighbor, Slovenia, to see how different it could have been had Croatia's leaders embraced democracy instead of holding on to the past and their personal power at the expense of the people of Croatia.
- At this point, I include the text of a bill I recently introduced on this matter, H. Res. 375.

[FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES, FEB. 15, 1998]

(BY CHRIS HEDGES)

Zagreb, Croatia, Feb. 14: Three former Croatian soldiers who provided testimony and documents detailing the killing of scores of ethnic Serbs and Croats by the Croatian Army say they have been repeatedly beaten by unidentified assailants, their vehicles have been firebombed and they receive almost daily death threats.

The men, who gave their evidence to the war crimes tribunal at The Hague, say they witnessed scores of abductions and killings in and around the town of Gospic during Croatia's 1991 war of independence from Yugoslavia.

They say that hundreds of ethnic Serbs, as well as Croats who opposed the nationalist movement, were executed and buried in mass graves around Gospic by the Croatian Army, paramilitary groups and the police.

They also contend that documents they have turned over to The Hague implicate senior Croatian officials, including Defense Minister Gojko Susak, in the killings. The Croatian Government denies that its senior officials were involved in human rights abuses during the war.

The decision by Milan Levar, 43, the former commander of a reconnaissance intelligence unit; Zdenko Bando, 41, a former military police commander, and Zdenko Ropac, 45, a former secret intelligence police officer, to approach The Hague is one of the very rare cases in which senior officers have volunteered to describe abuses committed by their own soldiers to the tribunal.

But the men, two of whom have fled their native town of Gospic because of attacks, said in interviews recently that the tribunal took so long to investigate the reports of massacres that local authorities had time to destroy some of the evidence. They also assert that the tribunal has not provided them and their families with promised protection.

'We do not understand what is going on,' said Mr. Levar, who first met with tribunal investigators last August in Gospic, 100 miles south of Zagreb. 'We have been branded traitors. We live under constant pressure. The police chief in Gospic and the local army commander are war criminals. What kind of protection can we expect from these men?'

Christian Chartier, the spokesman for the tribunal, said in a telephone interview that it was not the tribunal's policy to comment on its investigations. But Mr. Chartier confirmed that investigators had met with the three men and twice offered them 'proposals for protection' that he said the former soldiers had 'turned down'

'We are still discussing this with them,' he said, refusing to elaborate. 'We are hopeful that a proposal may be accepted.'

The men say that a few of the mass graves were cleared by the Croatian military shortly before tribunal investigators visited Gospic last summer, but that other sites remain untouched. The men, two of whom went to The Hague in December to meet again with investigators, also said they turned over videotapes showing Croatian forces killing civilians.

'I was in a position to see everything that was happening,' Mr. Bando said. 'The orders to carry out these killings came to us from the Ministry of Defense. Those who committed these crimes were never punished, in fact they were promoted within the military, the police and the political structure. They remain in power. We find this inexcusable.'

Mr Bando, who is unemployed and facing an unexplained eviction notice from his small apartment in Zagreb, said that in October 1991 local police officials pulled up to his office with a truck piled with bodies, including those of women and children.

'Blood was dripping through the floor boards,' he said. 'These people had just been executed. The driver was looking for a place to bury them.'

Mr. Levar said he witnessed the deaths of about 50 people. Mr. Ropac said that he knew of 127 ethnic Serbs who were killed in Gospic before he left the town and 'that the figure grew later.'

The allegations of widespread killings by nationalist Croats around Gospic were bolstered last September when one of the executioners Miro Bajramovic, confessed in The Feral Tribune, an independent weekly, to the murder of 72 civilians. Mr. Bajramovic was arrested after the publication of the confession and remains in prison.

The three former soldiers said that Mr. Bajramovic was being subjected to frequent beatings and intense 'Psychological torture' by his Croatian jailers.

Their accusations have been impossible to substantiate, though.

Gospic, which had some 15,000 inhabitants before the war, is now a forlorn, heavily damaged town with just 3,000 people.

The former soldiers angrily assert that those who carried out the abductions and murders came from 'the scum of the town' and were primarily interested in looting the homes and property of the Serbs and Croats they killed.

'These people killed my town--the town of my father and grandfather,' Mr. Levar said. 'I doubt it will ever revive. They killed it to get very rich. This dirty money keeps them in power. All we want is for them to pay for their crimes.'

Bosanski Samac, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Feb. 14--(AP): Two Bosnian, Serbs surrendered today to the United Nations war crimes tribunal, the first Serbian suspects to do so voluntarily.

Driving their own cars, with officials from the United States Embassy as passengers, the suspects, Milan Silmic and Miroslav Tadic, left for Tuzia, where NATO-led troops will meet them for the journey to the court, in The Hague.

Indicted on war crimes charges in 1995, the two men say they are innocent.

They said they believed that conditions had been set for a fair trial.

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Whereas Dobroslav Paraga, who has twice been adopted as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International, has endured hardship for openly calling on the Government of Croatia to honor its commitments under the Helsinki Accords to respect the fundamental human rights of all the citizens of Croatia;

Whereas Dobroslav Paraga had been tried on three occasions by the courts of the former Government of Yugoslavia, the initial charge being that, in 1980, he, along with a Jewish Croatian student, Ernest Brajder, authored a petition opposing torture in Yugoslavia and calling for the release of political prisoners;

Whereas, as a result, both men were arrested and, three days later Ernest Brajder died under what the Department of State calls `mysterious circumstances';

Whereas, in 1986, Mr. Paraga sued the Government of Yugoslavia for injuries, both physical and psychological, inflicted on him by prison authorities during his imprisonment;

Whereas the regime and court in Zagreg denied him a fair and just trial, an account of which was set forth in the Department of State's annual Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1987;

Whereas the Government of Yugoslavia forbade Mr. Paraga in 1987 to speak out publicly in any way about his experiences as a political prisoner and the Government of Croatia has continued this prohibition against the fundamental political and human rights of Mr. Paraga;

Whereas the Government of Croatia persecuted Mr. Paraga for criticizing his country in the United States in 1993 and he was subsequently stripped of his post as Deputy Chairman of the Committee for Human Rights of the Croatian Parliament;

Whereas in August 1997 the Government of Croatia brought charges against Mr. Paraga within days of his meeting with investigators from the Hague War Crimes Tribunal to which he turned over documentation involving allegations against several high officials of the Government of Croatia;

Whereas, in violation of this order of silence, Dobroslav Paraga has come to the West to speak out about human rights abuses in Croatia;

Whereas, upon his return to Croatia, Dobroslav Paraga risks imprisonment again because of his open criticism of the Government of Croatia's human rights abuses; and

Whereas in 1998 Dobroslav Paraga called on the Government of Croatia to take the following actions: (1) to establish independent television and radio stations in Croatia; (2) to allow full freedom of the media in Croatia; (3) to allow free and fair elections to take place in Croatia; (4) to establish a judiciary and lower court system that is independent from the ruling party or any other party in Croatia; (5) to re-establish the independence of the Croatian Party of Rights (CPR) that was illegally disbanded in 1993, including the reinstatement to the Croatian Parliament of the 5 seats of the Croatian Party of Rights; and (6) to end the terror and abuse of justice perpetrated by the Government of Croatia against Dobroslav Paraga and the Croatian Party of Rights: Now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That is the sense of the House of Representatives that the Government of Croatia--

(1) in recognition of the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, should guarantee its citizens fundamental human rights and freedoms;

(2)(A) should establish independent television and radio stations in Croatia;

(B) should allow full freedom of the media in Croatia;

(C) should allow free and fair elections to take place in Croatia;

(D) should establish a judiciary and lower court system that is independent from the ruling party or any other party in Croatia;

(E) should re-establish the independence of the Croatian Party of Rights (CPR) that was illegally disbanded in 1993, including the reinstatement to the Croatian Parliament of the 5 seats of the Croatian Party of Rights; and

(F) should end the terror and abuse of justice perpetrated by the Government of Croatia against Dobroslav Paraga and the Croatian Party of Rights;

(3) should dismiss the charges currently pending against human rights activist Dobroslav Paraga and end all forms of harassment against him and his family; and

(4) should conduct an investigation into the death of Ernest Brajder, who, according to the Department of State, died under 'mysterious circumstances', and should make its findings public.

[Page: E376]

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