

Kosovo rebels told UN of organ harvests

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PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Ethnic Albanian rebels in Kosovo gave detailed testimony in 2003 on an alleged program to kill Serb captives, sell their organs, and bury hundreds of victims to hide evidence of civilian killings, according to a U.N. document obtained by The Associated Press.

The 30-page compilation of statements by at least eight people to U.N. investigators could provide momentum to claims that the world body failed to pay proper attention to war crimes by ethnic Albanian Kosovars in their 1990s war for independence.

U.N. authorities briefly investigated organ harvesting claims in 2004 but never launched a full-fledged probe, prompting Serb accusations of double standards in pursuing war crimes.

The document outlines an alleged scheme to take captives of the Kosovo Liberation Army rebels to Albania in the aftermath of the war so their kidneys, livers and other organs could be removed at a home that had been set up as a medical clinic.

U.N. officials were told the home was equipped with specialized equipment and medical personnel to carry out operations.

In a letter dated Dec. 12, 2003, Paul Coffey, the top justice official in Kosovo at the time, wrote to Jonathan Sutch, the official in charge of Yugoslav tribunal investigations in Kosovo, that the alleged crimes were reported to the U.N. in Kosovo by "multiple sources of unknown reliability."

Coffey said the information was "based on interviews with at least eight sources, the credibility of whom is untested, all ethnic Albanians from Kosovo or Montenegro who served in the Kosovo Liberation Army."

Details of the interviews were given more than seven years ago to the U.N.'s Netherlands-based tribunal that was then responsible for prosecuting war crimes in the former Yugoslavia; no one has been brought to trial.

The interviews were made available to the AP by an international official who asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of the case.

They appear to back allegations made by Council of Europe investigator Dick Marty, who said in a recent report on the case that Western governments ignored the accusations for fear of destabilizing Kosovo.

Marty's report in December named Kosovo's Prime Minister Hashim Thaci, the former head of the KLA, as the boss behind a network dealing in kidneys and other human organs as well as organized crime. Thaci has denied wrongdoing and has supported an international inquiry. According to the documents, the sources told U.N. officials in 2003 that senior KLA officers and officials from the Albanian government were involved in the alleged crimes, which purportedly went on as late as the summer of 2000, almost a year after Kosovo came under U.N. and NATO control.

One source is quoted as telling investigators that the first two surgeries to harvest organs were done "to breach the market," and that traffickers later were able to make up to \$45,000 per body.

"The largest shipment was when they did 5 Serbs together. ... He said they took a fortune that time," the source said according to the document. "Other shipments were usually from two or three Serbs."

The source told investigators that workers at the Rinas airport outside the Albanian capital of Tirana and at the airport in Istanbul, Turkey, where the organs were allegedly taken for sale, were bribed "to close their eyes."

The flight between the two cities takes about 1 hour 45 minutes; sources told the U.N. the house where the organs were allegedly harvested was a two-hour drive from the airport. If packed in ice after removal, organs are viable for several hours after extraction - hearts and lungs for four-six hours, livers for 18-24 hours, kidneys for 24-48 hours.

Two sources claimed they took part in delivering body parts to Tirana's international airport, but "none of the sources witnessed the medical operations," U.N. officials noted in the document.

The organ trafficking claims, first made public in a 2008 book by former U.N. war crimes prosecutor Carla del Ponte, are resurfacing as Kosovo marks three years since declaring its sovereignty, with strong backing from the U.S. and most countries in the European Union. Since then, Kosovo has met strong resistance from Serbia, which claims the territory as its spiritual homeland and seeks to undermine statehood. The alleged trade in kidneys of killed captives has given Serbia ammunition in its fight to counter Kosovo and its Western backers. Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic on Wednesday called on the U.N. Security Council to authorize an international investigation into the allegations and to deal with claims that some countries "would love to sweep this thing under the carpet."

The head of the U.N. mission in Kosovo, Lamberto Zannier, told the AP that the 2,000-strong EU mission - known as EULEX - now in charge of dealing with war crimes in Kosovo was given every war crimes file that the Yugoslavia tribunal and the U.N. possessed, including witness statements.

Both the U.N. and the EU have prosecuted war crimes committed in Kosovo by both Serbs and ethnic Albanians, but the interviews are the first recorded reference on alleged organ trading to emerge.

"I can confirm that we gave the material we had to EULEX ... This was early in 2009" Zannier said by phone from New York, where he was reporting to the U.N. Security Council. EULEX says it has launched a preliminary investigation into Marty's allegations, but would not immediately comment on the 2003 report. It was not immediately clear if it was following up on any of the information given by the eight sources to the U.N.

So far, both the U.N. and EULEX have maintained that their investigations into the alleged organ harvesting have failed to yield any evidence.

The statements taken by the U.N. give specific details of locations in Albania where the KLA allegedly kept detainees and buried victims, some of them also ethnic Albanians accused of collaborating with Serbs.

The sources, described as "low to midlevel ranking KLA members," said the Serbs were driven by trucks and vans to Albania where they were held in detention centers and some went through medical checks.

The trail was partly followed up in February 2004, when a team of U.N. and tribunal investigators visited a house in the village of Rripe where the sources said the organ harvesting took place.

The investigators, accompanied by a local Albanian prosecutor, recovered syringes; empty containers of Tranxene, a muscle relaxant; chloraphenical, an antibiotic; and a piece of gauze similar to material used for surgical scrubs.

Chemical agents sprayed on the floors and walls of the house revealed two sizable splatters of blood - one in the kitchen, another in a storage room. But forensics tests were never conducted on the stains, and U.N. officials at the time said they could not explain why not. According to the sources in the U.N. document, most of the alleged Serb victims ranged in age from 25 to 50.

One source said he was instructed by KLA superiors not to beat the prisoners. He became suspicious when they were to deliver "a briefcase or a file with papers that would be given to the doctor when the captives were delivered" to the house in northern Albania.

"I thought about how this was the only house where I brought people, but never picked anyone up," one source testified. "It was around this time that I heard other guys talking about organs, kidneys, and trips from the house to the airport."

Associated Press Medical Writer Maria Cheng contributed from London.