

Serb Ex-General Accused of Massacre Is Captured

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Ratko Mladic, the former Bosnian Serb general held responsible for the massacre of some 8,000 Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica in 1995, was arrested on Thursday, signaling Serbia's intention of finally escaping the isolation it brought on itself during the Balkan wars, the bloodiest in Europe since World War II.

The capture of the former general removes a major obstacle to Serbia's becoming a member of the European Union, which had insisted that Mr. Mladic be apprehended and turned over for trial in an international court before the country could get on track to join the 27-nation union.

President Boris Tadic of Serbia gave few details in announcing the arrest but promised that Mr. Mladic would be turned over for trial at The Hague within days. "I think today we finished a difficult period in our recent history," he said.

For Europeans, buffeted by financial crises, the arrest of their most wanted war crime suspect has a resonance on the magnitude of the killing of Osama bin Laden for Americans. It also amounts to a significant diplomatic victory, suggesting that the incentive of membership in the world's biggest trading bloc remains a crucial foreign policy tool in the post-cold war world.

Mr. Mladic had been at large for 15 years, and many European diplomats argued that Serbian officials could have arrested him long ago if they felt that the benefits of opening the door wider to the West outweighed appeals to virulent nationalism among some Serbs, who still regard Mr. Mladic as a hero. Mr. Mladic was captured in the farming town of Lazarevo north of Belgrade after the authorities received a tip that a man resembling him was residing there. Serbia's interior minister, Ivica Dacic, said that Mr. Mladic had been found with his own expired identification card and an old military book. Some Serbian news reports said he had been living under the name of Milorad Komadic and had labored as a construction worker. But the Interior Ministry said Thursday that it did not have evidence suggesting he had taken on a false identity.

The massacre at Srebrenica was the worst ethnically motivated mass murder on the European continent since World War II. Mr. Mladic was also accused of war crimes for the three-and-a-half-year siege of Sarajevo, in which 10,000 people died, including 1,500 children.

While close associates had predicted that Mr. Mladic would sooner kill himself than face capture, Serbian news media reported that he was alone at the time of his arrest and had two pistols with him that he made no attempt to use. The police said he did not resist arrest. Witnesses said he appeared disoriented and tired, and that one of his hands appeared to be paralyzed, possibly because of a stroke.

[...]

In hiding since 1995, sometimes in plain sight at soccer matches and funerals, and sometimes deep underground in Belgrade, Mr. Mladic was believed for years to be protected by allies in the Serbian military and intelligence services. But he appeared to have spent the last few years with no more than a handful of loyalists to help him, investigators said.

A senior Obama administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity said that the administration had been quietly pushing for Mr. Mladic's capture for years.

Mr. Mladic's arrest was welcomed by world leaders, including those gathered in Deauville, France, for the Group of Eight summit meeting. President Obama said in Deauville that the arrest was important for the families of Mr. Mladic's victims. President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, the host in Deauville, said the Serbian government had made a "courageous decision" that constituted "another step towards Serbia's eventual integration into the European Union."

The arrest was also praised, in more somber tones, by survivors of the Srebrenica massacre and the siege of Sarajevo. "I want to congratulate Europe and Tadic," said Munira Subasic, head of the Association of Mothers of Srebrenica. "I'm sorry for all the victims who are dead and cannot see this day."