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Natasa Kandic replies to Yugoslav Army's Public Affairs Office

I will not be silent about the horror

Gentlemen, you sent a letter to the editor of Danas, in which you inform him of what I said in an interview with the journalist Bojan Tonicic, what I had concealed, and what it all really means. I find it more natural and appropriate to address you directly, both as an institution and as the authors of the text titled 'Ms. Kandic makes serious, arbitrary and unfounded accusations', which was published in Danas on August 17, 2000.

In your letter you stated that I had made "false allegations about the events in Kosovo and Metohija" during the NATO intervention and that this is a crime for which I should answer, together with those who failed to prevent it.

Gentlemen of the General Staff, I know very well whom you consider to be criminals, terrorists and spies. In today's Serbia, the authorities suspect all citizens, including minors and children, of terrorism. When someone even dares to broach the issue of the responsibility of the Yugoslav Army, you respond with secret trials. But I belong to those who refuse to be silent, even if that means being put on one of your trials. I will not be silent about the horrors into which you, generals, pushed the young recruits in Kosovo. I can still see the twenty-something-year-olds giving their daily ration of milk, bread and cheese to Albanian women and children who had been forced, on military and police orders, to abandon their villages and homes. I will remember forever, April 14 and 15 1999, and the journey from Mitrovica to Pec and Djakovica – a convoy of Kosovo Albanian civilians, and the young soldiers approaching them, crying, asking them to take their food, to forgive them, because they were not guilty, because their superiors had transported them to Kosovo, and they did not know where they were being taken. These young soldiers were the light, the humanity, and life all around Kosovo.

I will not be silent about the horrors I saw, those that the civilians in Kosovo suffered. I saw with my own eyes Kosovo Albanian villages surrounded by tanks, I heard grenades and shelling, and saw thousands and thousands of people with bags in their hands, escorted by the police or army, abandoning their homes because they were told that Kosovo was no longer their homeland. I encountered many convoys of civilians on the road. Some would dare tell me that the army had shelled their village and ordered them to go to Albania, and that, on leaving their village, they saw the police enter, loot and burn their property. I spoke with those who found themselves in Izbica on March 26. They told me how they had been surrounded by soldiers in green uniforms, reservists, and how the men had been separated for execution. One woman described in detail how the soldiers entered a crowd of people and selected those who were to stay and those who were to go to Albania. In the first round of separation, they took her husband and father-in-law, a seventy-year old man. She watched as a group of 20 men shot her father-in-law and her husband. In the second round, they took her son. She offered money for his life, but the soldiers told her they could not let him go. She did not see her son being shot, but she heard later on the radio that he too was shot on that same day, March 26. The shelling forced about 10,000 civilians to leave

Izbica and go to Albania. Mothers in this group were not allowed to see, for the last time, the faces of their dead children.

Gentlemen of the General Staff, these are the facts about the events that took place in Kosovo during the war. In Izbica, Bela Crkva, Cuska, Vucitrn and many other places where unarmed civilians were killed, the truth is harsh. Unfortunately, these are not, as you say, “false allegations.” If you have no one else to hold responsible for these crimes, count on me – I am here and I admit: I am guilty for having done nothing to prevent them.

Gentlemen of the General Staff, you criticize me in the letter because I did not praise the Yugoslav Army and its “skilled command strategies, high morale, rational tactical procedures and professional disguise.” Do you really think that citizens of Serbia and Montenegro believe that in Kosovo or in Serbia you fought some real, living enemy, some entity you call NATO criminals, and that you won! Gentlemen, every victim of the NATO attacks is *your* victim too. Initially, you wholeheartedly supported the war against these ‘foreign invaders’, only to sign, on June 9, 1999 in Kumanovo, the military-technical agreement on the withdrawal of the Yugoslav Army, police, paramilitary and para-police units from Kosovo. And *that* is what you call victory.

Gentlemen of the General Staff, the question of the legality and legitimacy of the NATO intervention against Yugoslavia has been discussed internationally. Experts of international humanitarian law are seriously analyzing the violations of humanitarian law that could be ascribed to NATO. Shortly after the bombing of the national television building and civilian casualties in Belgrade, a renowned international human rights organization, Amnesty International, published its expert opinion, according to which, that was an attack on a civilian target, prohibited by the Geneva Conventions.

You claim that I have concealed the facts about the victims of the NATO bombing and destruction of property. Gentlemen of the General Staff, I wrote to you on April 3, 1999, asking permission to investigate the events that occurred during the bombing, specifically those concerning the attacks on civilians and civilian objects. As a reminder: specifically for those purposes, you organized bus tours of bombed sites. But the permits were issued to selected journalists, and you held a monopoly over information, as if these were tourist attractions and not facts concerning human lives! Although the HLC was the only human rights organization that asked for this kind of permission, we were left to wait for days in front of the Army’s Public Affairs Office, until we were straightforwardly told – “No, you can’t go, we know what kind of organization you are.”

Gentlemen of the General Staff, you accused me of concealing the ‘Shiptar terrorist’ crimes committed from January 1, 1998 to present day. But what do you call those on ‘our’ side who committed crimes? Are they terrorists too for you, or national heroes? I ask you: what have you done to clarify the fate of Serbs, Roma, Bosniaks and Montenegrins who disappeared from the territory under your control? Back then, but also after the arrival of international forces in Kosovo, these were only numbers for you – the more people killed and kidnapped, the better for Serbia. You do not like to face the parents of killed and missing soldiers. You led their children where you would never lead yours, and you award them medals for bravery while their parents are asking you about their graves.

You claim to have successfully confronted the mightiest power in the world, and that you won. So if you really are as strong as you claim, why don't you do one small thing for the people in Serbia and Kosovo: why don't you contact those with whom you signed the Kumanovo agreement and start resolving the fate of missing persons and prisoners? There are 2,500 missing Kosovo Albanians who disappeared during the war, 1,150 missing Serbs, Roma, Montenegrins and Bosniaks who disappeared after the arrival of international forces in Kosovo, and there are about 900 Kosovo Albanian prisoners in Serbia.

I remain firm in my position: to defend the right to life, the right to a native language, freedom of movement, the right to publicly criticize the government, and I support every court that punishes the perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity regardless of their ethnicity. A crime is a crime.

Natasa Kandic