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Croatia politician must face inquiry over war crimes claims

Amnesty International has renewed its call on the Croatian authorities to investigate claims that a senior politician failed to prevent war crimes committed by Croatian forces during the 1991-1995 war.

Vladimir Šeks, currently Deputy Parliament Speaker, who was a leading political figure in the Eastern Slavonija region in 1991, faces fresh claims that he failed to stop grave abuses perpetrated by forces under his command.

On 13 January, the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, a Croatian non-governmental organization (NGO), submitted new testimony from a witness claiming that Vladimir Šeks had failed to investigate her report of a crime allegedly committed by his subordinates in 1991. The NGO provided statements by five other witnesses related to other crimes allegedly committed in Eastern Slavonija at that time.

“The allegations against Vladimir Šeks must be investigated. It is well documented that during the war he was in a position of political command, as the Head of Crisis Headquarters in Eastern Slavonija, and that his subordinates committed crimes with impunity,” Nicola Duckworth said.

“He must not be allowed to misuse his power as an influential political figure in order to block the justice process.”

Croatian forces under Vladimir Šeks’ command are said to have tortured civilians during the conflict that followed the disintegration of the former state of Yugoslavia.

In its report, *Behind the Wall of Silence: Prosecution of War Crimes in Croatia*, published in December 2010 Amnesty International expressed its concern that a number of high profile Croatian military and political leaders have to date still managed to evade investigation for alleged war crimes.

Following publication, one of the people named in the report – Tomislav Merčep – was arrested and an investigation against him opened by the Croatian State Prosecutor’s Office.

In relation to the alleged responsibility of Vladimir Šeks, the Amnesty international report documented allegations about the potential command responsibility of Vladimir Šeks for crimes committed in the town of Osijek in 1991. The allegations are based on publicly available information such as court judgments and court testimonies of several witnesses.

“According to the Geneva Conventions, which Croatia is a party to, military and civilian superiors may be criminally responsible for the acts of their subordinates if they knew, or had information that such crimes under international law were committed or were about to be committed.”

“The wounds of the war in Croatia are still open. Accountability for war crimes and redress for the victims and their families irrespective of ethnic origin, accompanied by a frank and informed debate in the public sphere will help Croatia move forward,” said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia

Programme Director.

Background

Vladimir Šeks has been a member of the Croatian Parliament since the country's independence in 1991 as a representative of the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica – HDZ). He held several senior positions including the posts of the Speaker of the Parliament (December 2003-January 2008), Vice-Speaker of the Parliament (from January 2008 until present), Deputy Prime Minister (1992-1995) and the State Prosecutor (April – August 1992).