

# Assassination of a prime minister

By Andrew Parker

THE politically motivated murder of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic in Belgrade highlights a post-war nation drowning in the murky waters of serious, organized crime.

Since the 1980s the Serbian republic has witnessed a steadily growing mafia thread its way through the corridors of power and to the heart of the state government apparatus.

The wars of independence in the former Yugoslavia allowed the political gangsters to get rich, quick. Economic sanctions introduced by the United Nations, particularly an arms embargo meant to limit the capabilities of each side to wage war, simply increased the mafia's opportunity to make money. The black market thrived under sanctions, multiplying prices 10 times and more. Savings accounts were emptied in order to survive, the use of the Deutschmark as hard currency wiped out the value of the Dinar, and, thus, nearly every bank deposit was devalued to almost no significance. It has now been estimated that 80% of the Serbian economy is controlled by forces outside the government.

Once the wars finally drew to a close, so did the war profiteering. The lowering of economic sanctions brought prices back to more realistic levels and therefore put a lot of black market businessmen, as they are known locally, out of business. They were forced to look elsewhere to make their money, and today Serbia is a by-word for the sex trade, narcotic manufacturing, people trafficking and deals done with the gun.

Djindjic, described as "The pillar of reform in Serbia" by the Serbian deputy prime minister, was the man entrusted by popular vote to end this gangsterism and build a clean, democratic system of which the country could be proud. He was widely supported by the United States and the European Union, who saw him as the positive face of Serbia, keen to integrate into Europe and stabilize the Balkans, the continent's most troubled region.

General Ratko Mladic, infamous leader of the Bosnian Serb army and wanted for trial at the Hague War Crimes Tribunal in the Netherlands, is still on the loose, reputedly enjoying a lavish lifestyle in a secret location protected by a faithful security service. He remains a popular Serbian hero and nobody with serious political ambition seems willing to hand him over to The Hague. However, in the last few months Djindjic's government has been under heavy US pressure to arrest the elusive Mladic. The threat to withdraw aid is a strong enough bargaining chip in a country still swamped by unemployment and inflation. Giving up Mladic and his protectors may have been a well-conceived sacrifice for the Prime Minister, keen to please western donors and seen to be acting for the good of all. It may also have resulted in his death from a sniper's bullet.

Referring to Djindjic's murder, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, the Dutch Chairman of the Operation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), stated; "I expect that the progress made in recent years in moving the country (Serbia) closer to European and international organizations in the field of security and human rights will not be derailed by this cowardly act of violence. I consider this murder an unacceptable attack on the process of democratization and the rule of law in the country."

With these words the cynical observers will say that



Slain Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic

words are all they are – that this is the state of Serbia today, no matter how every well meaning, optimistic international organization wants to see it differently.

A former Yugoslav army general, Ljubodrag Stojadinovic, writing in the newspaper Politika, said of the mafia; "Their goal is to bring conservative forces back into power. That is not a realistic concept and they understand that. But they need a chaotic situation in which to survive. They are people who belong ideologically to the past and who survive on a philosophy of death."

He added: "I see Serbia in the future as a democratic country within a framework of western European values. But it will be a long road and (on Wednesday) we took several steps backwards."

If the United States and its few allies succeed in 'liberating' Iraq and imposing their democratic ideals, then they

may well be advised to look at this week's assassination of Zoran Djindjic and attempts on the life of Hamad Karzai, de facto ruler in Afghanistan, as pointers to the future. While democracy may decorate a country with sincere ideals, many in the former republic of Yugoslavia and, more pertinent to today's climate, in Afghanistan, will see the UN, EU et al, simply trying to paper over the cracks of a potential earthquake.

The Kurdish question in northern Iraq may pose as many problems for an international community as the post war situation in Bosnia Herzegovina or Kosovo. The Sunni and Shiite occupation of central and southern Iraq may then split the country into three, forming another parallel with Bosnia with its Muslim, Croat and Serb divisions blocking the process of democratization at almost every turn. In Iraqi cities Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds and Arabs are found everywhere, mixing freely just as the mixed races and religions were able to do in pre-war Sarajevo.

And could this potential split in Iraq fracture the region further, in similar circumstances to the collapse of the Soviet Union, where 11 nations were formed almost overnight in 1992? Are these the strategic aims of the United States or have they even looked that far forward?

A confidential UN plan, obtained last week by The Times newspaper in London, envisages the UN stepping in about three months after a successful conquest of Iraq, and steering the country towards self-government, as in Afghanistan.

The plan resists British pressure to set up a full-scale UN administration. It also says that the UN should avoid taking direct control of Iraqi oil or becoming involved in vetting Iraqi officials for links to the President or staging elections under US military occupation.

Instead, the plan proposes a UN Assistance Mission in Iraq, to be known as UNAMI, to help to establish a new government. This would provide political facilitation, consensus building, national reconciliation and the promotion of democratic governance and the rule of law. Words very similar to those of the OSCE's chairman in Serbia, Mr. de Hoop

Scheffer.

The Bush administration's special envoy to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, has already stated; "Some have said it is impossible for Iraq to become a democracy. The US government disagrees." While a UN official commented; "Everyone can swallow up to three months of US government in Iraq,"

While it has been the criminal elements in Serbia who have effectively taken control of the state system, despite widespread intervention from the international community, could it be the much-feared and unseen fundamentalists in the Gulf States who will take advantage of the Iraqi people's liberation and establish a network to rid the Arab peninsula of western troops and to establish a more wide-ranging Muslim state, serving their own interests.