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Karadzic escapes Nato's night raiders

Gun battle as peacekeepers swoop on Bosnian war criminal

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Radovan Karadzic, Bosnia's most wanted war criminal, has escaped arrest after a botched attempt to snatch him by soldiers from the Nato peacekeeping force, S-For, ended in a gun battle with his bodyguards.

Although an official S-For spokesman refused to confirm any operation to arrest Karadzic, three separate S-For sources in the Bosnian Serb town of Banja Luka told The Observer that at least two Nato soldiers were injured. One source said the operation was still continuing.

Karadzic, the former Bosnian Serb president, who is wanted by the war crimes tribunal in The Hague to face charges of genocide during the Bosnian war, has played a cat-and-mouse game with Nato forces for the past six years. Nato troops have orders to arrest him on sight.

The former Bosnian Serb leader, who is known to have a well-armed bodyguard, has sworn that he will not be taken alive to The Hague.

He is said to move in the areas around Foca, Visegrad and the Montenegrin border and to have shaved off his distinctive wavy hair to disguise himself as a priest.

Although local media in Montenegro and Belgrade reported yesterday that 10 British soldiers from the

Special Air Service had been killed in the operation, the reports were emphatically denied by the Ministry of Defence which also denied that any British soldiers had been involved in the attempt to arrest Karadzic.

According to S-For sources the gun battle took place in the early hours of Friday after a multi-national force located his hideout in the Bosnian Serb Republica Srpska. Bosnian Serb sources in the town of Pale said that Karadzic had most recently been hiding in the village of Zavait, near the border with Montenegro.

The Observer had been tipped off earlier in the week by sources on the trail of Karadzic and by Nato sources that Karadzic would be arrested within days and taken to The Hague after he had been located by S-For troops and placed under surveillance.

Sources told The Observer that the surveillance operation had involved soldiers from the SAS, although it appears they may not have been involved in the attempted arrest. 'There was an operation. There were casualties and it was aborted,' one S-For source said yesterday.

A warrant has been out for Karadzic's arrest since 1995, and he is charged with 20 war crimes, including genocide, crimes against humanity and violation of the laws or customs of war.

Karadzic has been sheltered by his sups supporters and hidden in a series of villages in the mountainous and sparsely populated Republica Srpska. A previous attempt by Nato troops to snatch Karadzic fell through when he was apparently tipped off by the French that his arrest was imminent. Details of the operation were steeped in confusion yesterday. A UN source in Sarajevo said: 'Everyone is talking about it but we are finding it impossible to get any information on what is going on.'

The reports of the attempt to seize Karadzic and take him to

The Hague come as pressure has mounted on the Bosnian Serb authorities to hand him over or co-operate with the tribunal in tracking him down. It also comes amid evidence that the mood among ordinary Bosnian Serbs is turning towards acceptance of the fact that Karadzic will be handed over sooner rather than later to join his former master Slobodan Milosevic in prison.

Last week his wife insisted he would not surrender voluntarily. 'The attitude of Radovan Karadzic has not changed, nor will it change under any conditions,' Ljiljana Zelen- Karadzic said in a statement.

Her comments followed hard on the heels of a visit by the Bosnian Serb Prime Minister Mladen Ivanic, to the war crimes tribunal where he told chief war crimes prosecutor Carla del Ponte that the Bosnian Serb parliament was ready to pass a new law allowing co-operation with the triburibunal. It also follows a Nato pledge that Karadzic and his military chief Ratko Mladic would be brought to justice 'come what may'.