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## News Releases

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JUNE 1, 2011 ATLANTA, GA

### **Former Serbian paramilitary police officer pleads to immigration fraud**

ATLANTA – Zeljko Zekic, 48, of Lawrenceville, Ga., pleaded guilty Tuesday in federal court to lying to federal immigration officials about his place of residence and employment during the Bosnian War of 1992 to 1995.

The case was investigated by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Human Rights Violators and War Crimes Unit.

Zekic had claimed on his immigration paperwork that he was unemployed and living in the Serbian Republic during the war, when in fact he was living in a Serbian-controlled town inside Bosnia and was an active-duty member of the Serbian paramilitary police during the period of armed conflict.

"ICE will not turn a blind eye to perpetrators of crimes against humanity who seek safe haven in the United States," said Brock Nicholson, special agent in charge of ICE's Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) in Atlanta. "ICE is committed to investigating those who have fraudulently obtained their entry into the United States by attempting to hide their past."

In 2002, in Belgrade, Serbia, Zekic and his family applied for refugee access to the United States. On a biographical form that Zekic understood would become part of his family's refugee application, he indicated that during the time of the Bosnian War (1992 to 1995), he was unemployed and living in the Republic of Serbia, away from the conflict zone. Partly on the basis of these two lies, the family's application was approved and Zekic moved to the United States, eventually settling in Lawrenceville. Zekic later applied for a green card and, in so doing, did not correct the statements about employment and residency in his original paperwork. Zekic ultimately received a green card and is now a permanent resident alien.

U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Georgia Sally Quillian Yates said, "This man, who was part of the paramilitary apparatus controlled by recently captured war criminal Ratko Mladic, twice misled federal immigration officials into believing that he was only a refugee of the struggles that tore Bosnia and Herzegovina apart, rather than a member of the group that has been identified as a very substantial part of that war."

Research by ICE's Human Rights Violators and War Crimes Unit revealed that Zekic had lied about his job and his residence during the Bosnian War. They discovered that Zekic was a master sergeant with a police force based in a key Serbian-controlled town inside Bosnia, inside the conflict zone. He lived and worked in this town during the entire period of the armed conflict, to include the time of the massacre of more than 8,000 Bosnian men and boys in Srebrenica.

Zekic's two false statements were material to the U.S. immigration officials' decision-making process. At the time Zekic applied for refugee status, all adult male Serbs who had lived in Bosnia at the time of the Bosnian War were subject to additional questioning concerning any possible connection to Republic of Serbia Army units that committed war-time atrocities in Srebrenica and elsewhere. Because he concealed the fact that he was a senior police official who lived and worked in a Serbian-controlled town within Bosnia (and thus was likely connected with the Serbian military effort in Bosnia), immigration officials were unable to perform the additional background investigation into his case.

District Court Judge Timothy C. Batten, Sr., accepted Zekic's guilty plea Tuesday and will sentence him on Aug. 16. The crime to which he pled carries a maximum penalty of five years in federal custody and/or a fine of up to \$250,000. Zekic is already in removal proceedings before an immigration court.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys William Traynor and Robert McBurney prosecuted the case with Jessica Morris, a trial attorney from the Department of Justice's Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section.

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