

# Jewish fury at delay in Croat war crimes trial

## Death camp commander 'too ill', reports Chris Bird from Zagreb

**T**HE trial of a Croatian second world war death camp commander was postponed yesterday amid bitter criticism from Jewish groups and Serbs who say Croatia is unable to reconcile itself to its fascist past.

Dinko Sakic, aged 77, was extradited to Croatia from Argentina last year to face charges of war crimes against the civilian population after admitting, in an Argentinian television interview, to his past as commander of Jasenovac concentration camp, dubbed the Balkan Auschwitz, between April and November 1944.

He is accused of having played a part in the deaths of at least 2,000 people at Jasenovac during that time.

Mr Sakic attended court in the Croatian capital Zagreb yesterday flanked by two guards, and mumbled that he felt unwell.

Damir Kos, the vice-president of the court, later told reporters: "The findings of joint [medical] examinations are that, given his medical condition today, the defendant is unfit to participate as the subject of the proceedings." The trial was postponed until March 15.

"I hope when I'm 77 I look as good as Dinko Sakic," said Efrain Zuroff, the director of the Nazi-hunting Simon Wiesenthal Centre's Jerusalem office, after the announcement. "This is not an auspicious beginning."

As he spoke outside the court, a Croatian woman came up and screamed at Mr Zuroff, who was wearing a *yarmulke* skull-cap: "You killed Jesus Christ — we don't want you!"

Jewish groups claimed yesterday that health problems were being used by ageing defendants in war crimes cases to drag out proceedings.

"It was the same with Erich Priebke [an SS officer tried in Italy]," said Tommy Baer, a senior member of the Jewish group B'nai Brith International. He has been involved in Mr Sakic's case since 1995, and found it hard to hide his disappointment at yesterday's

postponement. "The integrity of Croatia's judiciary is at stake here," he said.

The main prosecution lawyer, Cedo Prodanovic, said: "[The defence] want to delay the trial to lessen the impact of the trial internationally."

Jasenovac was a mini archipelago of camps set up on both sides of the Sava river by the Ustashe regime which ruled Croatia as a Nazi puppet state between 1941 and 1945. The jackbooted guards differed little from those of the SS, save for the Ustashe "U" in place of the swastika on their uniforms.

Mr Sakic first spoke publicly of his Ustashe past in an interview with the Croatian journal Magazine in 1995. "I regret that we hadn't done all that is imputed to us. I'm proud of all I did. If I was offered the same duty today, I would accept," he was quoted as saying.

Croatia only moved to extradite him last year to beat its erstwhile foe Serbia to the draw. Mr Sakic is also wanted there for war crimes.

Serbs claim that hundreds of thousands died at Jasenovac. But Croatia's nationalist president and historian, Franjo Tudjman, has said 70,000 to 80,000 were killed.

Mr Sakic's 72-year-old wife, Nada, was also extradited last year for her alleged work as a guard at a womens' section of Jasenovac. But she was released last month due to lack of evidence — to the anger of Jewish groups.

"We have new evidence," claimed Mr Zuroff yesterday.

Central to the dispute is the unwillingness of Mr Tudjman's nationalist government to put Croatia's brief but brutal Nazi-backed independence in the dock. In January the ailing president dismissed international pressure to bring Mr Sakic to trial as political pressure on Croatia. The tightly controlled state press has made only cursory mention of the trial.

Mr Tudjman has argued that the Ustashe regime was not a Nazi puppet government but an expression of Croatian desire for independence.