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EU Probe



Organs sold for as much as €100,000 (illustration) Photo: Index Open

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Kosovo: Israeli accused of organ trafficking

At least nine people, including former senior Health Ministry official, suspected of involvement in international network. Israeli citizen Moshe Harel listed as wanted by Interpol

Associated Press

At least nine people, including a former senior Health Ministry official, are suspected of involvement in an international network that falsely promised poor people payment for their kidneys, then sold the organs for as much as €100,000 (\$137,000), according to an indictment obtained by The Associated Press.

The indictment is the starkest revelation of the extent of organized crime in the country since Kosovo declared independence in 2008.

The organized criminal group trafficked people into Kosovo for the purpose of removing human organs for transplant, EU prosecutor Jonathan Ratel said in the indictment, which he filed in mid-October. Some 20 foreign nationals "were recruited with false promises of payments" in 2008, he wrote.

Victims were promised up to \$20,000 (€14,500), while recipients were required to pay between €80,000 and €100,000 (\$110,000-\$137,000).

According to the indictment obtained by the AP on Thursday, the victims came from Moldova, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkey, and lived in "extreme poverty or acute financial distress."

The EU prosecution has made requests to secure evidence from authorities in Canada, Germany, Kazakhstan and Turkey, including access to e-mails of two suspects on servers in the United States. Ratel is part of the EU's 2,000-member police and justice mission, which is in charge of serious crime in Kosovo.

Seven Kosovo nationals, including Ilir Rrecaj, a former senior Health Ministry official, have been charged with five counts, ranging from trafficking in persons to unlawful exercise of medical activity and abuse of power. None of the suspects are in custody.

Kristiina Herodes, a spokesman for the EU rule of law mission confirmed the charges.

"Five persons have been charged with offenses of trafficking in human organs, organized crime and abusing official authority and two are charged with unlawful exercise of medical activities," Herodes said Friday.

Two others – Turkish Dr. Yusuf Sonmez and Moshe Harel, an Israeli citizen – are listed as wanted by Interpol. Sonmez is the subject of several criminal proceedings in other countries, including Turkey, for human trafficking and removal of organs, according to the indictment.

"Both Sonmez and Harel are fugitives from justice," the indictment said.

The prosecution alleges that one of those indicted, Kosovo surgeon Lutfi Dervishi, was the ringleader of the criminal group. It said Dervishi attended a medical conference in Istanbul in 2006 and asked for someone who could perform organ transplants. He was contacted by Sonmez six months later.

Another Israeli 'unindicted co-conspirator'

Dervishi and Sonmez then carried out the operations in the private medical clinic Medicus, managed by Dervishi's son, Arban Dervishi, who is also indicted. Harel was involved in "identifying,

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recruiting and transporting victims" and "ensuring the delivery of cash payments by electronic bank transfer" prior to surgery, the indictment said. Two other doctors, Sokol Hajdini and Driton Jilta, are also indicted.

Another two doctors, Israeli national Zaki Shapira and Turkish national Kenan Demirkol, are identified in the 46-page document as "unindicted co-conspirators."

Kosovo law forbids the removal and transplant of organs.

In 2008, investigators closed the private health clinic where the doctors worked as part of the initial investigation. Kosovo police launched a raid triggered by suspicions that a Turkish man had sold his kidney to an Israeli recipient after he appeared fatigued at Pristina airport while trying to board a flight to Turkey.

The man, identified in the indictment as Yilman Altun, told Kosovo police at the airport he came to the Balkan country to donate his kidney on the invitation of the private clinics. A doctor found Altun was not in good medical condition, and sent him to the Pristina hospital for treatment.

When police searched the clinic in November 2008, they found an Israeli citizen in postoperative care, according to the indictment. Police seized medical records and supplies.

Rrecaj was fired from his governmental post after the raids and the suspects were arrested on November 4, 2008. They denied all accusations and were released after 30 days in detention.

Soon after the raid, the Belgrade-based daily newspaper Blic alleged that Dervishi was linked to allegations that members of the Kosovo Liberation Army kidnapped Serb civilians and killed them for their organs, which they later sold.

The allegations of the trade stemmed from a book by former UN War Crimes tribunal prosecutor Carla Del Ponte who claimed that organ harvesting took place in Albania's remote north. Subsequent investigations did not substantiate the claims.

The indictment has been filed in a local court and a hearing is scheduled for the end of the month, according to EU officials. The prosecution can still add the names of other suspects to the indictment and details of their alleged crimes.

The EU has 2,000 justice workers in Kosovo, including police, judges and prosecutors.

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