**Ban reaches into Croatian strongman's inner circle for rights champion**

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Ivan Simonovic, Croatia's justice minister, has been appointed as the United Nations' top human rights official at U.N. headquarters, ending more than 15 years of service in a government with a troubled rights record and bypassing several candidates with more extensive experience promoting human rights, according to senior U.N. officials and diplomats familiar with the contest.

Simonovic's appointment received a cool reception from representatives of Western governments and human rights advocates, who note that Simonovic served under a government that was accused of massive human rights violations, including the ethnic cleansing of ethnic Serbs in Krajina, during the Balkan conflict between 1991 and 1995.

Simonovic's Justice Ministry came under criticism last month from Amnesty International for failing to hold Croatian security forces accountable for crimes committed during the war. It also points out that Croatia's Justice Ministry failed to fully cooperate with the U.N. war crimes tribunal in The Hague. "Most prosecutions which have taken place since the end of the war relate to crimes committed by members of the Croatian Serb population while the crimes committed by members of the Croatian Army and police forces remain largely unaddressed," the report stated.

The report cites positive steps undertaken by Croatia -- including a February agreement signed by Simonovic and his counterpart from Bosnia-Herzegovina that allows for the extradition of convicted war criminals. But the report voiced concern "about the overall failure of the authorities to conduct prompt, impartial, independent and full investigations of war crimes and to bring perpetrators to justice."

But U.N. officials said Simonovic's past was closely scrutinized to ensure he was not linked to any abuses. The selection process was "extremely rigorous" and all the candidates were "looked at extremely carefully before a decision was made," said Martin Nesirky, the spokesman for U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. "The secretary-general is comfortable and happy with the choice of Mr. Simonovic."

Other U.N. officials have said that the appointment is reminiscent of former U.N. Secretary-GeneralBoutros Boutros-Ghali's selection of his first high commissioner for human rights, José Ayala Lasso, who had served previously as foreign minister under an Ecuadorean military government. It reflects reluctance by Ban to place an outspoken advocate for human rights in such a politically delicate position.

Simonovic, a former law professor and diplomat, has served as a senior Croatian official since the Balkan wars, when he was a member of the Croatian delegation to the Dayton peace talks, a U.S. brokered peace effort that ended the Bosnian war. In 1997, Croatian leader Franjo Tudjmanchose Simonovic as his envoy to the United Nations, where he also served in 2002 as president of the U.N. Economic and Social Council. He has headed Croatia's Justice Ministry since October 2008.

The U.N. General Assembly established a new assistant secretary-general position last December in a bid to raise the profile of human rights at U.N. headquarters. The decision followed a sustained campaign by rights groups and governments to place a high-level rights advocate at headquarters so he or she can better inject a human rights perspective into the U.N. leadership's deliberations on the major political crises of the day. Simonovic will act as liaison for the Geneva-based office of the U.N. high commissioner for human rights, Navi Pillay, in deliberations in New York.

The U.N. publicly advertised the job this year in international magazines like the Economist, drawing more than 100 candidates. But the hiring process has been carried out in secrecy, and only a handful of candidates were even interviewed for the job. The campaign included numerous prominent candidates, including Irene Khan, the former chief of Amnesty International; Heraldo Muñoz, the former Chilean ambassador to the United Nations; Joanna Weschler, a Polish national who monitored the United Nations for Human Rights Watch; and Michael O'Flaherty, an Irish national who serves on the U.N. Human Rights Committee.

But many candidates viewed as qualified never received an interview. A selection panel headed by Pillay settled on a shortlist of four candidates, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, a Brazilian diplomat; Juan Mendez, an Argentine human rights advocate; Karin Landgren, a Swedish national who heads the U.N. mission in Nepal; and Simonovic.

The United States, European governments, and human rights advocates raised concern with Ban's office about the hiring process and expressed dissatisfaction with the shortlist, arguing that the competition should be reopened. But Ban and Pillay refused to reopen the process.