

## **Aleksovski (Lasva Valley) Case**

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Asked to enter his plea to charges that Bosnian Muslim inmates were mistreated and killed at the camp he commanded, Aleksovski stood up and said: "I deny all culpability for these charges and do not feel responsible. Therefore I plead not guilty. I consider myself absolutely innocent."

(Eight out of the total of nine defendants who have passed through an initial appearance hearing before the Tribunal in the past two years have made identical or similar statements. Only one - Drazen Erdemovic - pleaded guilty for participating in the execution of about 1200 Muslim civilians after the fall of Srebrenica in July 1995. All the other have, like Aleksovski, asserted that they are "absolutely innocent.")

Aleksovski is one of six people accused of alleged crimes by Bosnian Croats against the Muslim population of the Lasva Valley in Central Bosnia. According to the indictment "Kordic & Others," issued on November 10, 1995, Aleksovski, together with Dario Kordic (then president of the Bosnian branch of the Croatian Democratic Union), Gen. Tihomir Blaskic (the commander of the Croatian Defence Council - HVO) and three other Bosnian Croat political and military leaders (Mario Cerkez, Ivan Santic and Pero Skopljak) is responsible for "the persecution on political, racial and religious grounds of the Bosnian Muslim population" of the Lasva valley area between May 1992 and May 1993.

The charges against Gen. Blaskic were in the meantime amended and are now contained in a separate indictment. According to the indictment, Aleksovski (37, born in Pakrac in Croatia) became commander of the Kaonik detention centre in Central Bosnia in January 1993. In May 1993 he became Head of the District HVO "Heliodrom" prison in Mostar.

The indictment alleges that "many of the detainees under his control were subjected to inhumane treatment, including, but not limited to, excessive and cruel interrogation, physical and psychological harm, forced labour (digging trenches) in hazardous circumstances, being used as human shields and some were murdered or otherwise killed." Aleksovski, as he said before Judge Jorda, considers himself to be "absolutely innocent" of all these things, which are described in the indictment as grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions and a violation of the laws or customs of war.

The Croatian authorities arrested Aleksovski on June 8 last year, in Split, but his transfer to The Hague—approved late last year by Croatia's high court—was postponed for unspecified "health reasons". Because of this, the Tribunal recently sent an independent medical commission to Zagreb. The commission confirmed that the accused was in a fit state to travel to The Hague.

While Croatian government and Tribunal representatives were negotiating the final details of his transfer at the end of April, the US administration, just in case, raised the stakes by threatening that if Aleksovski was not in The Hague by the beginning of May, it would block a large IMF loan to Croatia. Zagreb naturally opted for the loan, which is worth nearly half a billion dollars.

Aleksovski's arrival established a "Croatian majority" in the Tribunal's Detention Unit in Scheveningen. Of the eight accused currently detained, four are Croats (Aleksovski, Blaskic, Zdravko Mucic and Erdemovic), three are Bosnian Muslims (Zejnil Delalic, Delic and Esad Landzo) and only one is Serb (Dusko Tadic). Also held in the UN Detention Unit is Dragan Opacic, a Bosnian Serb under investigation for giving false testimony (Witness "L") in the Tadic trial.

Given this ethnic structure among the detainees, which is in inverse proportion to the ethnicity of the 74 indictees, it is logical to expect that pressure on the authorities in Belgrade and Pale will get stronger in the coming period, to encourage them to make their contribution to filling up the Tribunal's Detention Unit.

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