

Aleksovski Trial: Defense Presents Its Case

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During the preceding stage of the trial, the prosecution was trying to prove that that detention center - be it prison or a camp - was part of HVO's (Bosnian Croat political and military organization) wider strategy of expulsion of the Bosniak population from the Lasva Valley in early 1993.

According to the prosecutor and his witnesses, apart from being illegally detained, the civilians imprisoned at Kaonik were subjected to physical and psychological abuse, forced to dig front-line trenches, and used as human shields on several occasions. The original Lasva Valley indictment named Aleksovski (as the commander of the camp/prison warden) alongside HVO's political and military leaders - Dario Kordic, Mario Cerkez, and Tihomir Blaskic - but they are facing trial separately because they arrived at The Hague at different times.

Last week, the Zagreb lawyer Goran Mikulicic tried to dent the depiction of Kaonik and its commander/warden that the prosecution witnesses (former detainees and international observers) created during the earlier stages of the trial by summoning witnesses who recounted how much Aleksovski cared about the health of his detainees.

Two doctors and five nurses of the health center in Busovaca described how Aleksovski himself or his guards would bring ill detainees to them, and how they then proffered medical help to all - regardless of their nationality and religion.

Such claims contradict the statements by some detainees who have said that they were denied medical help at the health center after they presented themselves as Bosniaks. Some of the detainees also claimed that they had been taken to the health center because of the consequences of beatings they suffered at the prison/camp, but none of the doctors and nurses who testified last week was willing to confirm that.

On the contrary, the Busovaca health center staff claimed that nobody ever brought them any detainees with bruises, fractures, or other consequences of beating. According to them, all Kaonik inmates they treated suffered from chronic diseases, such as high blood pressure, heart problems, or diabetes. To support this, the defense submitted medical records for some detainee-patients.

When asked by the prosecutor whether they had received the approval of patients for disclosing their medical files, Dr. Bilic, head of the Busovaca health center at the time of alleged crimes, stated that they had not, but that this was not contrary to medical ethics.

Apart from the Busovaca health-center staff, the former chief justice of the District Military Court in Travnik also testified last week. The witness visited Kaonik - which he referred to as the district military prison - on several occasions in early 1993, in order to "supervise" detained HVO soldiers, who were under his jurisdiction.

He said he did not see other detainees, because "they were not under his jurisdiction." He also alleged that he had never heard of Kaonik detainees being used to dig trenches or as human shields and, as far as he knows, there were no such cases.

In addition, the witness described Aleksovski as a "very conscientious" prison warden. He recalled an instance when Aleksovski had called him up and sought advice as to what to do with certain HVO soldiers who had killed two prisoners.

The Kaonik commander/warden allegedly told him on the occasion that he had reported the incident to the military police and that criminal charges had been brought against four members of the HVO suspected of having perpetrated the crime. The witness told Aleksovski at the time that he had done the right thing.

The witness, however, did not know whether an investigation had been initiated on those criminal charges and whether anyone was punished for those killings. That, he said, was not under his jurisdiction.

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