

Blaskic apologises for his 'failure' to stop Ahmici massacres

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General Blaskic, charged as the HVO commander in Central Bosnia with 20 counts of crimes against humanity, apologised for the fact that he was unable to prevent massacres in and around the village of Ahmici.

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After having spent almost 20 months sitting in the courtroom as the accused, General Tihomir Blaskic last week moved from the dock into the witness box to appear as the 145th witness in this marathon trial that began on 23 June 1997. Of these, 102 have been Prosecution, and 43 Defence witnesses.

General Blaskic, who, as the commander of the HVO forces in the Operative Zone Central Bosnia 1992-1993, is charged with 20 counts of crimes against humanity, grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions and violations of the laws or customs of war, began his testimony with the claim that he "did the best he could" in the war situation in Central Bosnia" and that he "sincerely regrets that this was not enough."

Blaskic was a major in the JNA when the war broke out in former Yugoslavia. In mid-August 1991, he sought to resign his commission and without waiting for permission, he left with his family for Vienna, where he managed to "create conditions for comfortable life."

However, he was not destined to enjoy in it: when, at the beginning of 1992, it became obvious that the preparations for the new war were underway in Bosnia, Blaskic felt "a moral obligation to help with the preparation of the defence from Serb aggression" and responded to the call of the "crisis headquarters" of his hometown Kiseljak. He agreed to come only for 2 months, but ended up staying for more than 2 years.

Upon his arrival in Kiseljak, at the end of April 1992, Blaskic was appointed commander of all military formations in the municipality. As it was the time of the Croat-Muslim alliance, he shared the post with one Bosniack (Muslim) officer. He arrived with hopes that he would find "some military structure", but found instead, "numerous armed groups in the small area" which "paraded in uniforms and with arms around the town" or "set up check-points on the road for their material benefit" and which did not accept him as a commander. Blaskic, nevertheless, believed that he would gain their respect and obedience with the passage of time.

Two months later, the political and military leaders of the so-called Croatian Community of Herzeg-Bosnia, Mate Boban and General Milivoj Petkovic, appointed Blaskic a commander of the HVO in the Operative Zone, Central Bosnia and promoted him to the rank of a colonel.

Apart from him, the command of the Operative Zone at the time included two more officers - a deputy commander and an assistant for information - as well as two secretaries. The only military documentation he claims to have received from his predecessor, a mercenary with the nom de guerre "Zulu", was a notebook with the writing: "War Diary" on its cover.

From the beginning of the presentation of its evidence, the Defence consistently attempted to present Blaskic as a "general without an army" and without any authority in relation not only to the civilian authorities, but also to the military police.

The accused himself, clearly tried to confirm such an image last week. By taking over the command over the HVO in Central Bosnia, as he said, instead of an "organised army", Blaskic found "armed peasants", from whom he himself then had to create usable "military formations."

It is even more important for the Defence to prove that Blaskic - although formally responsible for all HVO forces in his Operative Zone - had no authority over the military police, and even less over the so-called "special units". According to the defendant, both the police and the above-mentioned units were under the direct command of the Ministry of Defence of Herzeg-Bosnia. When asked by Judge Almiro Rodrigues what was the aim of such a "radical change" in the structure of the HVO, the accused answered that "he did not know the aim, but did know the consequences". His "commanding power" was significantly reduced, while "parallelism in commanding" was introduced.

In highlighting such an "unnatural situation", which - according to the Defence - does not exist in any other army in the world, Blaskic's counsel aims to prove he was not responsible for acts committed by either the military police or HVO special units. According to many witnesses from both the Defence and Prosecution, most of the crimes committed in the Lasva Valley -including those in Ahmici - were perpetrated either by the members of the military police from Vitez under the command of Pasko Ljubicic, or by the "Knights" - an HVO special unit which was then commanded by Darko Kraljevic. While Ljubicic is still at large, Kraljevic

was killed in a shoot-out after the war.

During his testimony, Blaskic listed all HVO special units which, he claimed, were active in Herzeg-Bosnia, including the "Convicts brigade", against whose commanders "Tuta" Naletelica and "Stela" Martinovic - an indictment for crimes allegedly committed in Mostar, has already been issued.

As well as being a "general without an army" the Defence also claims Blaskic had no influence on the civilian authorities in his zone. According to the Defence, this meant that he was not personally involved in the persecution of the Bosnian Muslims on political, racial or religious grounds. When asked by his counsel whether at any point in time he was "a governor of Central Bosnia", i.e. simultaneously possessed civilian and military authority, Blaskic categorically replied: "No, never!"

The testimony of General Tihomir Blaskic will continue next week.

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