

## **Blaskic Trial: Blaskic Slow To Find Out About Perpetrators Of Ahmici Crimes**

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By Mirko Klarin

"Do you now know who attacked whom in the village of Ahmici [on 16 April 1993]?", Anto Nobile, Defence counsel of General Tihomir Blaskic asked the defendant last Friday. Blaskic answered bluntly and clearly: "The Croatian Defense Council (HVO) Military Police attacked units of Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina (B-H Army) and inhabitants of Ahmici."

Presiding Judge Claude Jorda responded to this with the observation: "That was the Military Police that was under your command."

Judge Jorda's remark was not a question since General Blaskic, who appeared last week as a witness, previously testified that a day earlier, on 15 April 1993, the Military Police and Special Task Forces had been - in expectation of a B-H Army offensive - put under his own command by order of HVO Headquarters. General Blaskic also confirmed that in his capacity as the commander of the Operative Zone, he ordered Military Police to deploy in the area of Ahmici in order to seize control of a key thoroughfare - and not to murder and expel the entire Bosniak (Muslim) population of the village and scorch all Bosniak houses.

General Blaskic was unequivocal in his claim that he neither ordered the atrocity nor was able to understand what was really going on in Ahmici from the information available to him at the time.

According to his own testimony, Blaskic spent 16 April 1993 in the Hotel Vitez disco bar that had been converted into his 'operative headquarters'. His only means of communication were two telephones, which he used to communicate with units deployed in the field; with politicians such as Dario Kordic - who inquired about the situation in the field; with HVO Supreme Command; and with the British Battalion (BritBatt) that operated in the area as a part of United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) at the time. As if he knew he would one day need such a record, he ordered a duty officer to keep detailed log of all events at the headquarters.

General Blaskic further recounted how at 11:42 a.m. Pasko Ljubicic, the then commander of the 4th Platoon of Military Police, phoned Headquarters for the first time that day. Ljubicic's alleged description of the operations in Ahmici was that they were "hard-going"; that the B-H Army was "obstinate", and that the operations were the most hard-going "in the vicinity of houses surrounding the mosque and the school".

Exactly one hour later, at 12:42 p.m., Blaskic called back Ljubicic, who is alleged to have reported to be still holding on to his positions. At 1:52 p.m. Ljubicic called the Headquarters again with the same report, in response to which Blaskic ordered Ljubicic's Military Police to take up positions on the hill overlooking the village of Ahmici. This was in order to have better control over the thoroughfare they were responsible for.

Around 4 p.m. Blaskic received a written report from Ljubicic describing the HVO Military Police counter-attack on the B-H Army. Ljubicic reported that "combat actions with a view to drive them [the B-H Army] off are being undertaken."

Finally, at 6:02 p.m. Dario Kordic, the then highest representative of the political wing of HVO in Central Bosnia, called to inform Blaskic that "Pasko [Ljubicic's] men are taking the hill," and that they had "done their part." Blaskic's statement remained vague both as to what could Kordic have meant by the latter expression and how he understood this himself. This will, no doubt, become clearer after the cross-examination of Blaskic by the Prosecutor. Another opportunity to clarify the matter will come at the trial of Dario Kordic, slated for mid-April, where Ahmici atrocity is bound to be one of the central areas of concern.

Presenting his view of the genesis of Bosniak-Croat conflict and events that preceded the atrocity at Ahmici, Blaskic last week took the Trial Chamber through events in his Area of Responsibility, day-by-day, from 8 January to 16 April 1993. His testimony mostly coincided with statements given by forty-odd Defence witnesses in his trial, as well as of those witnesses who appeared in the trial of "Kupreskic & Others" over the past several weeks. According to that story, both Croats and Bosniaks lived in Central Bosnia relatively peacefully up until the moment when, in the second part of January 1993, the B-H Army had cut off the road connecting the towns of Kiseljak and Busovaca in order to establish a territorial link between its forces on the ground.

In the course of those actions by B-H Army, a dozen or so men were killed in two Croat villages, Dusina and Lasva, thus causing the "spillage of the first blood" of the Bosniak-Croat conflict in that part of Bosnia.

Events then slowly deteriorated, setting off the "spiral of violence," which was soon out of control. A significant movement of the forces of B-H Army in mid-April caused an increase in the number of incidents, including the kidnapping of an HVO commander, and murder of his body guards in Novi Travnik and Zenica. Blaskic interprets those events as a proclamation of a campaign against HVO leaders. In order to counteract such actions, on 15 April he issued three combat orders, including the one which deployed 4th Platoon of Military Police - under the command of Pasko Ljubicic - in the Ahmici area... The rest of the story is well-known.

It remains to be seen whether Blaskic's version of the massacre at Ahmici will bear any influence on the trial of "Kupreskic & Others", and in particular on the defence strategy of the six local Bosnian Croats who were indicted for taking part in the attack against their Bosniak neighbours. In the course of their defence, they remain adamant that it was the B-H Army that had attacked the village, and that the local Croat inhabitants were merely defending themselves - with numerous casualties on both sides. But since the Defence team of the "Ahmici Six" have already expressed their predilection for "borrowing" both defence strategy and witnesses from Blaskic's own Defence team (Anto Nobile and Russel Hyman), it is possible that in the rest of the trial, Kupreskic brothers and others may choose to revise their version of the massacre somewhat.

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