

Blaskic trial: Colonel Praises, Then Accuses The General

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"I am positive that the HVO carried out the major massacres in Lasva Valley in April 1993. I find it very difficult to believe that the HVO command in Vitez did not know or did not order the attack on the village of Ahmici, which is only 3.5 kilometers from Hotel Vitez (HVO HQ). I do not believe that any command structure does not know what is happening with its soldiers that short distance away.

"In conclusion, despite my great personal liking for Tihomir Blaskic, I believe that Tihomir Blaskic - as HVO commander in Central Bosnia - does have command responsibility for the actions of his soldiers. Even assuming Tihomir Blaskic neither knew nor ordered any crime, why did he do nothing when I asked something to be done. I consider that noting effective was done while I was the British commander in Central Bosnia, and I stayed there until the 10 May 1993.

To the best of my knowledge, no investigation was carried out, despite my requirement that a full investigation - including BH Army representation - should be carried out into the massacres in the Lasva Valley. Regretfully, I repeat that it is my opinion that Tihomir Blaskic was the effective commander of the HVO in Central Bosnia. As such, he must be held responsible for the actions of HVO soldiers. Even if I believe it is perfectly possible that he was not present in person when such crimes were committed."

Bob Stewart was the British colonel who on 22 April 1993 discovered the massacre in Ahmici and in front of western television cameras swore at the members of HVO who asked what was he doing there. "I don't need the permission of the bloody HVO, I'm the UN!" he stormed.

Summoned as *amicus curiae*, the friend of the court, in the concluding phase of the trial of General Blaskic, Stewart last week described the day in April 1993 when he took his unit to the hills above the Lasva River Valley with intention to stop the ongoing conflict between Bosnian Croats and Muslims. Soldiers of the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina he met on the way refused to obey his request to cease their attacks, quoting a massacre of women and children in Ahmici as a reason. Colonel Stewart at first did not believe them, but promised to verify their claims.

When he entered Ahmici, he was able to see with his own eyes that the massacre was not only real, but even far worse than the BH Army soldiers told him. British soldiers found carbonized remains of men, women and children in the ruins of Muslim houses in Ahmici. The founding shocked him, Stewart told the Tribunal. The same evening he sent a message to Tihomir Blaskic, commander of the HVO Operative Zone in Central Bosnia, demanding an investigation, identification of those responsible for the crime, and their punishment.

Two days later, during his meeting with General Blaskic, the British colonel repeated his demands verbally. Stewart told the Tribunal, that on that occasion Blaskic conceded that the atrocity occurred within his area of responsibility, and that appropriate measures must be taken. In his description of Blaskic's reaction to Ahmici atrocity, Stewart said he was under the impression that Blaskic was also shocked himself. Whether it was because of Blaskic's genuine concern, or because he was caught red-handed, Stewart said he did not know.

In early May 1993, Stewart met Blaskic again, as well as Ante Valenta, representative of Bosnian Croat civilian authorities in the town of Vitez. He accused them of complicity to genocide for not taking any actions to find and punish the responsible individuals. Since Valenta, according to Stewart, admitted having heard of the Ahmici crime two days after the event, i.e. on 18 April 1993, Prosecutor Kehoe asked him what he thought of Blaskic's claim that he had found out about the massacre only on 22 April. "I am sorry to say

it, but this is a lie,” replied Stewart.

In reply to questions by judges, Prosecutor and the Defence, Stewart said that Blaskic never complained against the “dual chain of command.” He was equally quiet about the problem of not having control over the Military Police or special units of HVO, which are thought to be the perpetrators of the massacre in Ahmici and other crime in the Lasva River Valley. Colonel Stewart said he was certain Blaskic knew of the operation in Ahmici, although he thought it possible that the crime was planned and executed without his knowledge.

Stewart admitted that he found it “difficult to testify against a man like Blaskic,” and that he “wanted to find the solution without accusing the man he considered a friend. I am defending a principle here that I follow myself. It is that the commander is responsible for acts of his subordinates,” he nevertheless concluded. In response to Defence question whether he was talking of military or criminal responsibility, Stewart said: “I am not saying whether criminal or any other – simply a responsibility. I speak as a soldier.”

Location: Bosnia and Herzegovina

Focus: International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia

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