

Blaskic Trial: 'Lack Of Knowledge'

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However, Blaskic says he knows little or nothing about this. He denies any HV soldiers were present in his Operative Zone while he was in charge, and knows little about the presence of the HV in Herzegovina.

He adamantly maintained this position even after the Prosecutor Gregory Kehoe presented a Croatian military circular that pronounces Central Bosnia part of the HV's southern front and consequently announces the formation of the so-called Outpost Command Centre Forward Command for Central Bosnia.

Blaskic replied that it was "the first time he had heard that the HV's southern front included Central Bosnia." The judges in turn noted that the area covered by the above-mentioned Outpost Command centre or Forward Command included the Lasva River Valley, of which he was in charge at the time.

Blaskic explained this by asserting that he was only a "little or small commander" at the time, not yet commander of the entire Operative Zone. He further denied knowing of any HV officers who were appointed HVO commanders, or of Bosnian Croat leaders travelling to Croatia's capital, Zagreb, for "consultations".

Blaskic's memory was not jogged when the Prosecutor presented a letter written by several Bosnian Croat leaders - one of whom was Dario Kordic, whose trial started last week - seeking a meeting with the then Croatian Minister of Defence in order to "inform him of situation in Central Bosnia and receive further instructions."

Blaskic even says he does not know why after the Tribunal issued an indictment against him in November 1995, the Croatian President Franjo Tudjman decorated and appointed him to the post of Chief Inspector of the Croatian armed forces. There may, of course, be a good explanation for Blaskic's "ignorance".

In six counts of his indictment, Blaskic has been charged with grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions, which relate to the protection of civilians and prisoners of war in conditions of international conflict.

The Defence thus aims to dispute the existence of a state of international armed conflict at least in central Bosnia - and to prove that the presence of the HV in Herzegovina in south-western Bosnia was not an occupation but merely an "illegal intervention" in an internal conflict.

The Prosecution has, on the other hand, been trying for the past two years to obtain from the Republic of Croatia and the (Croat-Muslim) Bosnian Federation documents it believes would prove conclusively the involvement of the HV in the Bosnian conflict.

Croatia has, however, refused to make the documents available on grounds of "national security interests", even though they were first requested under the subpoena duces tecum (the procedure that requests the production of evidence under threat of punishment) and then by the Trial Chamber's binding order.

The cross-examination of Blaskic was halted last week in order to hear depositions of military and legal representatives of the Croatian government, who tried to demonstrate that the surrender of requested

documents would indeed constitute a threat to national security.

The hearings were held in closed session, and the Trial Chamber is expected to decide whether to accept or refuse Croatian arguments in the coming days or weeks. Blaskic's Defence team presented more than two thousand documents from HVO military archives during the presentation of its brief, none of which pointed to the international character of the conflict.

The mass of documents also lacked the crucial report on the investigation into what took place at Ahmici that was undertaken by the HVO Security Force on Blaskic's orders. Since the position taken by the Defence is that the results of the investigation could help Blaskic's case, the judges asked why he failed to request delivery of that document alongside the plethora of other HVO documents that were requested and made available to him.

Blaskic's explanation was that he did not request permission to search HVO Security Force archives because he "presumed he would not be given permission," and because he feared that if he insisted regardless, he would be refused permission to obtain other documents too. Blaskic's cross-examination resumes on 3 May.

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