

Blaskic's Testimony Continues

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By Mirko Klarin

Did General Tihomir Blaskic, in a conversation with Colonel Bob Stewart, commander of British Battalion (BritBatt), admit responsibility for the crime committed eight days earlier in the village of Ahmici, in the Lasva River Valley? According to Blaskic's own testimony, the conversation on 24 April 1993 went like this:

Colonel Stewart informed him that BritBatt members of United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) had discovered burned corpses of men, women and children in Blaskic's area of responsibility. "Everything soldiers or commanders who are under my command do," Stewart reportedly told Blaskic, "is my responsibility, although not necessarily my guilt."

Blaskic reportedly replied: "Had this been done by soldiers under my command, I would also be responsible." This, at least, is Blaskic's version of the conversation. Although he appears on the list of prosecutor's witnesses, Colonel Stewart has not appeared before the Tribunal yet. This, however, does not preclude the possibility that he may be subsequently called to testify as the Prosecutor's rebuttal witness.

In the earlier part of his testimony (see Tribunal Update No. 114), Blaskic blamed the Military Police for the crimes in Ahmici. He conceded that they had been put under his direct command by order of the General Staff of Croatian Defence Council (HVO) of 15 April 1993, and that he had deployed them the same day to guard the key routes through Ahmici.

In the continuation of his testimony, last week Blaskic insisted that he had taken formal command over the Military Police at 11:42 a.m. on 16 April when the commander of the Military Police unit in question, Pasko Ljubicic, submitted his first report from Ahmici.

According to all previous witness testimonies, the massacre in Ahmici, where over 100 Muslims - most of them women and children - were killed occurred around and shortly after dawn. In other words, as Blaskic and his Defence team argue, the crime was committed when he was still not formally in charge of those allegedly responsible.

Prosecutor Greg Kehoe, on several occasions objected over the way the Defence examined Blaskic, on grounds that counsel Anto Nobile was "leading the witness" and interfering with the spontaneity of his testimony. The judges concurred, and on one occasion even gave the impression that they were listening to witness testimony of Defence Counsel Nobile, not Blaskic. The judges also took to examining the witness themselves, insisting on the details of how and when did Blaskic find out about the crime in Ahmici, and what steps did he subsequently take to discover and punish the perpetrators.

Blaskic told the court he first heard about events in Ahmici on 20 April, at a meeting in Zenica set up with the assistance of UNPROFOR, European Community Monitoring Mission (ECMM) and government representatives from Sarajevo, to negotiate a cease-fire between HVO and B-H Army in the Lasva River Valley.

One of the B-H Army commanders on that occasion told Blaskic that "his men [i.e. HVO] had killed several hundred people," without giving further details. Blaskic said that "he had certain suspicions regarding that accusation," but upon return to his headquarters he had "checked all reports and failed to trace any information on the murder of civilians."

Two days later Blaskic received just such information from Colonel Stewart, who informed him that he had personally seen the burned bodies of two men and six women and children in Ahmici, at least two of whom had clearly died in great suffering. Blaskic said that he had been "shaken by such findings," and had requested Stewart's assistance in the investigation of the crime on the following day.

The judges asked Blaskic why did he not go to Ahmici himself, to which he replied that he was prevented due to ongoing fighting. Judges further asked whether Blaskic had, upon finding out about the massacre, requested Military Police to submit a report on the events that took place in Ahmici. Defendant Blaskic replied that he had been receiving reports from the commander of Military Police during fighting - the veracity of which he had doubted - and that he suspected that some members of the Military Police might have committed crimes, but was unable to find out more.

Blaskic told the court that he first visited Ahmici 11 days after the crime, on 27 April, and saw the demolished and torched houses as well as the blown up minaret of the mosque. On the same day he held a press conference where he condemned the crime and said he was "horrified" with what he saw in Ahmici, and announced an investigation to find out who planned, organised and executed the crime..

Blaskic handed the investigation over to the HVO security service and the results were submitted the following month. However no names of alleged perpetrators were included and so Blaskic then ordered a second investigation. Then results of these were never given to him, but were reportedly sent directly to the Military Police Command in Mostar. This claim was in line with the key assumption of the Defence strategy and Blaskic's own testimony: that the order to execute the massacre of Muslim population of Ahmici was issued to Military Police by a "parallel chain of command," bypassing Blaskic as the then commander of HVO in the Central Bosnia Operative Zone.

The marathon testimony of Blaskic continues next week and is expected to be followed by his cross-examination. the Prosecutor. Presiding Judge Claude Jorda announced at the beginning of last week that the trial is expected be completed by 23 June 1999 - exactly two years after it had begun.

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