

## **Bosniak Army Abuse Charge Countered**

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Hadzihasanovic trial hears that Bosnian army troops protected, not imprisoned, Croat refugees.

Witnesses at the trial of former Bosnian army general Enver Hadzihasanovic have testified that ethnic Croat civilians apparently held prisoner by the accused's men were actually being sheltered from fighting that had erupted in the surrounding area.

Prosecutors allege that nearly 250 mostly Croat civilians from the central Bosnian village of Maline were herded by government troops into a primary school in nearby Mehurici on June 8, 1993, where they were kept for more than two weeks in cramped and overcrowded conditions with little food.

They argue that former Bosnian army's Third Corps commander Hadzihasanovic should be held responsible for this and a series of other alleged crimes committed by his subordinates - claiming that he didn't take the appropriate measures to prevent or punish such behaviour.

But witnesses testified this week that the "prisoners" were actually taken to the school for their own safety and, once there, were kept in the best conditions possible at the time.

Munir Karic, who was an assistant commander in the Third Corps' 306th Mountain Brigade during the war, told judges that the Croat civilians were brought to the school gym by men from his brigade purely for "safety and security reasons" after heavy fighting broke out nearby.

And Ferid Jasarevic, who had been a morale officer in the 306th brigade, said the Croat villagers had apparently asked for the army's help.

"They were absolutely not prisoners... they were people who were being taken care of," said Enis Ribic, who worked as a doctor in Mehurici during the period in question. "It prevented them from being in a conflict situation and running the risk of being wounded or killed."

Prosecutors have claimed the Croats were kept in poor conditions and were provided with inadequate food, sometimes receiving only a loaf of bread and a tin of minced meat each day to share among six or seven people.

But Ribic told judges that the conditions in the gym were "satisfactory" given the prevailing situation in Bosnia at the time, and were certainly no worse than those experienced by refugees elsewhere in the country.

"Of course in peacetime they wouldn't have been proper conditions but in wartime they were relatively alright," Ribic said, adding that the civilians had been given sports mats, straw and blankets to try to make them more comfortable, and that he and a female doctor were on hand to attend to their medical needs.

Karic, who had been involved in organising logistics for the 306th, said his own brigade simply didn't have enough food at their disposal to cater for the civilians as well.

Jasarevic told the court that the task of supplying the people with food and other necessities fell to a local government body responsible for looking after refugees. And he added that a Red Cross visit was organised within ten days of the Croats' arrival, and that the former had raised no objections to the conditions in the school gym.

A prosecution witness had testified earlier that some detainees had been taken to a separate building in order to meet the Red Cross workers. But Jasarevic said they had spoken to Croat civilians in the sports hall itself.

The indictment against Hadzihasanovic alleges that as well as being kept in poor conditions, the people in the sports hall were also beaten and interrogated by Bosnian soldiers.

Asked by prosecution lawyers whether he had treated people for injuries such as broken bones and severe bruising, Ribic answered that such wounds were inevitable during wartime. "[But] if you mean bruising from beatings, that didn't exist," he said. "I never saw any bruises as an effect of someone being beaten up."

Prosecutors also allege that, besides the Croats in the sports hall of the local school, a number of men were also detained in a facility in Mehurici known as the "blacksmith shop" during the same time period. They claim that these men were also beaten and interrogated during their stay.

Ribic told the court that he had occasionally seen people through the window of the building in question, which was near the clinic where he worked.

But he said he never knowingly treated anyone who had been kept there and, despite being nearby, had never heard any "moans or cries" which might have suggested that those inside were being assaulted.

The trial continues on November 16.

Michael Farquhar is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

**Location:** Bosnia and Herzegovina

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