

Bosniak Officers in the Dock

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In the first case of its kind, court hears alleged crimes of senior Bosnian army officers.

A former employee of the Kakanj power plant, Ranko Popovic, told the court this week that soldiers from the Bosnian army's seventh Muslim brigade took him prisoner and beat him in June 1993 when Muslims and Croats turned on each other and began fighting in central Bosnia.

His January 13 testimony, given in the trial of General Enver Hadzihanovic and Colonel Amir Kubura, the first high-ranking Bosnian army officers to go on trial at the tribunal, provided a graphic account of crimes committed against Croat and Serb civilians who lived in Muslim-controlled territory at the time.

Hundreds of Croats and Serbs, including women, children and elderly were imprisoned, wounded or killed during the fighting and tribunal officials said they hoped that this trial would help counter oft-repeated allegations that the tribunal is biased against Serbs.

Hadzihanovic and Kubara, whose trial began last month, are not accused of directly participating in the crimes. However, prosecutors allege that they are responsible for them because they knew or had reason to know that their subordinates were committing crimes and did nothing to stop them.

Popovic, a Serb, said that in addition to working as an engineer at the power plant, he was an amateur radio operator and that Muslim soldiers probably suspected that he was working as a "Chetnik spy".

He said fighting started in Kakanj on June 9, 1993. A few days later, on June 18, at about 2 pm, someone rang his doorbell.

"I was expecting a friend, so I opened the door," Popovic said.

Instead, he was greeted by two armed soldiers in camouflage uniforms.

The troops told Popovic that they wanted him to hand over his radio equipment. Popovic said he had already turned it in to the municipal authorities at their request the previous month and that he had a receipt to prove it.

The soldiers asked to see his receipt and when Popovic explained that it was in his car, the soldiers accompanied him to the vehicle to get it.

"I gave them the receipt, but it turned out that they weren't really interested in it, because after I gave it to them, they took my car keys and forced me into a van," Popovic said.

The soldiers drove him the Sretno Motel, located at the intersection of the Zenica-Sarajevo road, about a kilometre out of town. As soon as he arrived, a group of six soldiers started hitting and bating him.

“They punched me, kicked me, hit me with plastic cables and also used their rifle butts,” he said. “It’s hard to say how long it lasted. In such situations, time doesn’t mean much.”

Popovic said he tried to move towards a wall to protect his back and used his hands to protect his face and head. After the beating, the soldiers locked him in an empty four metre-square storage container in the motel’s basement where they held him for three days.

At some point during those three days, Popovic said one of the soldiers demanded that he lean against the bars in front of the storage container. Popovic did as he was told and the soldier used a wooden implement to beat him on the head. The soldier kept hitting him as blood poured out of his head, stopping only after the wooden implement broke.

On the third day, the troops locked another man in the basement as well.

The same soldier who had beat Popovic instructed him and the new prisoner to fight each other.

“We acted it out,” Popovic said. “He hit me and I hit him, but these weren’t real blows.”

After that, the soldiers forced both men back into the van. They released the other prisoner but took Popovic to the music school in Zenica, about 28 kilometres away.

Popovic said that when the soldiers took him into the building, one of them yelled, “Here is a Chetnik!” They then forced him to run a gauntlet of at least 10 soldiers who again kicked and beat him with rubber cables and rifle butts.

Next, they locked him in the basement, where 11 other prisoners were being held.

Popovic said he knew five of the other prisoners, all of whom were either Bosnian Croats or Serbs.

Two or three days after his arrival, he was taken upstairs for a “welcoming beating”. The guard brought him to a room where four soldiers were waiting to interrogate him.

“They asked me where my radio equipment was, to whom it was connected and what my code was,” Popovic said.

When the witness said he had turned in his equipment and that he did not have a code, they started beating him, again with rubber cables and the barrels of their rifles.

“I was worried that I would fall unconscious and I didn’t know what they would do to me if that happened, so I did everything I could to avoid that,” Popovic said.

When he returned to the basement, Popovic said he was “really beaten up”. Although there was no blood, he was “really black and blue”.

He said the other prisoners gave him water and a cigarette. "I'm not a smoker, but I smoked that cigarette nonetheless," he said.

Popovic said his treatment was similar to that of the other prisoners. They were all beaten twice, when they arrived, and once during interrogation, but they were never otherwise physically abused.

Although Popovic's description of his treatment at the hands of Bosnian soldiers was brutal at times, and certainly outside the laws or customs of war, court observers could not help but notice how they paled in comparison to the treatment of Muslim detainees in Serb-run camps.

For example, Popovic said that he and the other prisoners were provided with mattresses and blankets as well as adequate food and drinking water. Although they did not have toilets in the basement where they were being held, a guard took them upstairs to use the facilities whenever they needed.

"They were always ready to do that," Popovic said.

In addition, Popovic said he and the other detainees were given regular access to wash basins to bathe and were permitted to receive regular visitors. He said most of the inmates had relatives who regularly washed their clothes and brought them food.

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Location: [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)

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