

## **Bosniak Politician Describes Forcible Enlistment in Serb Assembly**

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Witness says he learnt of his new “role” after Bosnian Serb official plucked him out of detention camp where he was beaten.

A former politician told judges at the Hague tribunal this week that he was severely beaten in a detention camp, forced to sign a false statement, and then made to become a member of the Bosnian Serb assembly.

Mevludin Sejmenovic, a prosecution witness in the trial of wartime Bosnian Serb army commander Ratko Mladic, was one of the founders of the Bosniak-led Party of Democratic Action, SDA, and represented it in Prijedor as war was breaking out in the spring of 1992.

After the northwestern Prijedor municipality fell to Bosnian Serb forces that May, Sejmenovic was held in both the Trnopolje and Omarska detention camps, where prisoners were murdered, tortured and beaten, according to previous judgements at the Hague tribunal.

On arriving in Omarska, Sejmenovic said he was taken to a small building known as the “white house”.

“The white house was covered in blood – the floors, the walls – totally covered in blood. In one room near the entrance, there were a few people lying on the floor moaning,” Sejmenovic said.

He told the court that he was then taken to a room where he was beaten by five soldiers followed by a civilian. Afterwards, they called in another person “to wipe the blood off my face, because it was covered with blood”.

After that, he said he was brought to another room where he was interrogated by a man in civilian clothes and two others in uniform. They told him that officers from military security would come from Banja Luka to continue the interrogation, and that he would sign a statement implicating Muslim leaders in the conflict. The security officers arrived the next day and told him his case was to go before a military court, the witness said.

At some point afterward, Sejmenovic said he received an unexpected visit from a Bosnian Serb politician called Vojo Kupresanin. The witness told the court it was hard to explain how he felt during their encounter.

“You are in a pot where everything is death and death alone, and then a person appears from the top political echelon and as if nothing had happened, and tries to talk to you only about politics. And of course I was in fear, I was tense, and I thought this was another thing I had to face before my death,” Sejmenovic recalled.

He said he mostly kept silent while Kupresanin spoke, so that the conversation was “more of a monologue”.

The witness said he was then transported to Banja Luka, and was present while Kupresanin spoke by phone with wartime Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadzic, who is currently standing trial at the tribunal.

The witness said he heard Kupresanin tell Karadzic that they had arrived in Banja Luka, and “Karadzic told him to get me a suit, [that I should] put on some weight, and get proper nourishment and some rest”.

The witness said he was initially unaware of what was happening, but then a Bosnian Serb soldier walked up to him and said, “This is a good thing for you, becoming a member of the Bosnian Serb assembly. However, you have to be careful because the Muslims are going to kill you.”

Sejmenovic told the court that “it was only then that I actually found out what was going on”.

“Karadzic and Kupresanin needed that then – namely through me and through other survivors – so they could simulate a multi-ethnic government and show that in the [Bosnian Serb] government there were some people who were not Serbs, and accusations levelled by international community were wrong,” the witness said. “That way, they were trying to get rid of blame for all atrocities committed until then.”

When asked whether he got the impression that Kupresanin and other Bosnian-Serb authorities knew about the abuses taking place in Omarska and Trnopolje, the witness replied that “they knew fully” and

“were well informed”, but that they never expressed any regret or intention to punish the perpetrators.

“What I find puzzling to this day is the following – not at any point in time did I see any negative feeling in anybody’s face. They were not appalled, they were not surprised – nothing,” he said. “They were facing these facts as if they were normal developments during a war. That’s how they behaved even in Banja Luka. My impression was they all did accept what was going on.”

Prosecutors allege that Ratko Mladic, the highest authority in the Bosnian Serb army from 1992 to 1996, is responsible for crimes of genocide, persecution, extermination, murder and forcible transfer which “contributed to achieving the objective of the permanent removal of Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats from Bosnian Serb-claimed territory”.

He is also accused of planning and overseeing the 44-month siege of Sarajevo that left nearly 12,000 people dead, as well as the massacre of more than 7,000 men and boys at Srebrenica in July 1995.

Mladic was arrested in Serbia in May 2011 after 16 years on the run.

Before his experiences in Trnopolje and Omarska, and before the municipality of Prijedor fell to Bosnian Serb forces, the witness recalled taking part in a meeting with Bosnian Serb political and military officials about the fate of Kozarac, which had a mostly Bosniak population.

The meeting was held at the headquarters of the Serbian Democratic Party, SDS, in Prijedor town, and was attended by Bosnian Serb political and military leaders, as well as by the witness and other Bosniak representatives.

Sejmenovic said the Serb officials at the meeting presented an ultimatum – unless the Bosniaks in Kozarac surrendered 7,000 weapons, the town would be “razed to the ground”.

The witness said one soldier, Major Radmilo Zeljaja, repeated this threat several times.

“That was the last thing he said. ‘Unless you surrender seven thousand weapons and unless the Serbian flag is flying over Kozarac and the Serb police have control, I will raze Kozarac to the ground,’” the witness recounted.

Sejmenovic said one member of the Bosniak delegation asked how the weapons could be handed over if Kozarac did not actually have them. He said Zeljaja responded, “That’s your problem, gentlemen. This meeting is over.”

Kozarac was attacked by Bosnian Serb forces on May 24, 1992 and many of its houses were torched. The indictment alleges that “a number” of people were killed in Kozarac and surrounding areas.

During the cross-examination, defence lawyer Branko Lukic questioned Sejmenovic’s assertion that Bosnian Serb soldiers were present in the Omarska camp, in addition to police.

Lukic asked how the witness could tell whether someone was a member of the army, and Sejmenovic said he determined this partly by their uniforms and also by speaking to other prisoners in the camp. However, he said did not know any of the soldiers’ names.

Lukic pointed out that a number of people had been convicted for their role in Omarska at both the tribunal and at the State Court of Bosnia and Hercegovina, and all these judgements concluded that only policemen worked in Omarska.

“From my experience, there were not policemen alone,” the witness answered.

“You have no specific examples to offer to counter these judgements?” Lukic asked.

“I don’t know first or last names or their wartime assignments,” Sejmenovic said.

Lukic also asked whether the witness had participated in acquiring arms for Kozarac, and if he was present when shipments of weapons arrived. The witness denied that such shipments took place, but said people did buy individual weapons when they were able to.

When the lawyer asked whether had favoured arming the town rather than surrendering, Sejmenovic said that he was in favour of observing the law, of expanding the territorial defence force and of “letting it do its job”.

“We had no guarantees that we could stop bloodshed by any other means,” he added.

Presiding Judge Alphons Orié then asked whether the witness had advocated the purchase of weapons.

“Your honours, at that time one could not advocate anything any more. We were under blockade and encircled,” the witness replied.

He added that if it had been possible, he would have sought to acquire weapons, including tanks.

Much of the cross-examination dealt with the history of the SDA party as well as detailed questions about constitutional and political issues in pre-war Bosnia.

At one point, presiding Judge Alphons Orié remarked that the cross-examination was becoming “chaotic” and that the chamber was not “assisted by all the details”.

“We are getting further and further away from what this case is really about,” Judge Orié said.

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**Location:** Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Topic:** International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia

**Focus:** ICTY - Ratko Mladić Trial

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