

Bosnian Serb Leader Says Karadzic Was Peacemaker

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Hague witness Milorad Dodik was a politician in Karadzic's self-declared state, and is now head of Bosnia's Serb entity.

The current leader of Bosnia's Serb entity told the Hague tribunal this week that wartime president Radovan Karadzic tried to resolve the 1990 conflict peacefully and never ordered war crimes.

Milorad Dodik, who was a member of the Bosnian Serb assembly during the Bosnian war and is now president of Republika Srpska, appeared as a defence witness on Karadzic's behalf.

"I absolutely assert that Mr Karadzic never insisted on the commission of any crimes, nor did I witness that he was involved in anything like that," Dodik said.

War, he said, "is not a normal state of affairs".

"War is characterised by lots of violence and chaos. It's very difficult to control chaos. It was important to prevent chaos, but once it came about, those in positions of responsibility had to try to contain it. Unfortunately, in Bosnia and Hercegovina there were many local warlords who tried to interpret the situation in their own way and find own responses to it. It was the same on all sides," Dodik said.

As for the defendant's role, the witness said, "Mr Karadzic resolutely tried to find a way to resolve the conflict peacefully."

Prosecutors allege that Karadzic, the president of Bosnia's self-declared Republika Srpska 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.

Karadzic was arrested in Belgrade in July 2008 after 13 years on the run.

Questioning the witness, Karadzic, who represents himself in court, noted that Dodik had described him as "uncontested leader" of the Serbian Democratic Party, SDS, at the time.

"Did I have any means of coercion before or during the war to force members of the SDS to have me as their uncontested leader?" he asked Dodik.

"You certainly are an uncontested leader," the witness replied. "The people saw you as such. Your statements and conduct had the support of all people.... I wasn't witness to any instances of undemocratic membership or you exerting coercion against any member of your own party."

Dodik said the late Bosnian president Alija Izetbegovic laid the "foundation for the conflict" by officially declaring Bosnia independent from Yugoslavia in March 1992, following a referendum. War broke out shortly thereafter.

"I'm convinced that Izetbegovic's decision that Bosnia should secede was a unilateral secessionist act. He did not have the power that would allow him to make such a decision," he said.

According to Dodik, Izetbegovic "worked hard to promote his Islamic declaration" and wanted a society based on "Sharia law and Islamic values".

Dodik mostly gave lengthy answers to Karadzic's questions, and bristled when prosecutor Alan Tieger objected to their relevance.

"Please don't interrupt me," Dodik said at one point.

During the sometimes tense cross-examination, Tieger asked the witness whether "massive crimes were committed by Bosnian Serb forces against Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats during the course of the war".

"We had a civil war in Bosnia Hercegovina and military forces were organised of Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats, and all three sides violated the laws of war and committed crimes," Dodik replied.

Tieger asked the witness about comments he had made previously about the SDS trying to make its policies appear acceptable to the international community, while at the same time making other plans, including to dismiss non-Serbs from their jobs.

"Of course there was a dismissal of non-Serbs, but Serbs were also dismissed in territory controlled by the Muslims. It was war," Dodik said. "I understand the role of Mr Karadzic, who bears political responsibility for some events, but he stands accused of [participating in] a joint criminal enterprise, which to my mind is a made-up category."

"You say it's a made-up category. But that's not what you were saying in 2001," Tieger contended.

"That's possible - but such is life. We come to understand some things that may not have been clear to us," Dodik said. "All these [Hague tribunal] proceedings are based on the assumption that Serbs were a factor of disorder and that everybody else is right."

"That's frankly wrong," Tieger retorted sharply. "That's not position of this institution or the prosecution. That's not at all what I'm asking you about. Among the things you stated back then was that you accused the SDS leadership of organising and committing crimes."

"Excuse me, who did you say I stated this to? Some media?" Dodik asked.

Tieger said that the remarks were in a BBC news report dated January 12, 2001, quoting the BETA news agency in Belgrade.

According to these reports, Dodik stated that "it must be openly said that crimes were committed under SDS leadership".

"That was the political struggle between me and the SDS in 2001. It was a time of transition of power. You can consider this political discourse which need not necessarily be based on fact," Dodik told the prosecutor.

Tieger then referred to statements Dodik made in 2005, in which he expressed concern that Karadzic had taken 36 million deutschmarks out of Republika Srpska's treasury in spring 1997, shortly before going into hiding.

"You were bringing this conduct to the attention of your community and you considered it incomprehensible, and I assume deeply unfair, to impoverished war veterans and widows," Tieger said.

"What is your question? You want me to confirm this? Yes, when I made this statement I didn't know this money was used for material for reconstruction of Republika Srpska. It was used as a deposit for roof tiles, bricks and so on, but when I gave this statement I didn't know it had been deposited in such a way," the witness replied, adding that "there is nothing contentious about this statement, except you're using a newspaper I don't trust [Dnevni Avaz]. It's used for propaganda."

Tieger went on to ask Dodik about his relationship with Biljana Plavsic, who was a member of the Bosnian Serb presidency during the war. She pleaded guilty to persecution charges at the tribunal in 2002 and was sentenced to 11 years in prison. She was granted early release in 2009.

"Mrs Plavsic is a good and honourable woman," Dodik said. He added that he only got to know her well after the war, but was aware of conflicts she had with other SDS officials.

Tieger also asked Dodik about the case of Mevludin Sejmenovic.

In testimony testified he gave in the trial of Bosnian Serb army commander Ratko Mladic last year, Sejmenovic - a Bosniak - said that after being badly beaten in a detention camp, he was coerced into joining the Republika Srpska assembly to create the illusion of multi-ethnic rule there. (For more on this, see **[Bosniak Politician Describes Forcible Enlistment in Serb Assembly](#)**.)

Addressing Dodik, the prosecutor said, "You went to see Mr Sejmenovic where he was living [in Banja Luka] to have a discussion with him. You said you invited him to work in the assembly of Republika Srpska.... You related to him that this was something that Mr Karadzic had approved. Mr Dodik, the fact is, this was not a benevolent invitation to suggest [Sejmenovic] might want to consider joining the Bosnian Serb assembly under conditions where he could freely choose to do so. This man had just been taken out of Omarska [prison camp], isn't that correct?"

Dodik confirmed that this was the case, but added, "I was not myself free under such uncertain conditions. No one was free."

"We believed that by [Sejmenovic's] engagement we could eliminate the fear that existed to a significant degree," he added.

He denied ever stating that Karadzic was aware of the discussion beforehand.

"I don't see anything wrong there," he continued. "These were the first months [of war] - he had no more or less freedom than I had to decide what and how to do at that time," Dodik said.

Tieger pressed Dodik about the meeting with Sejmenovic.

"This was a man scared to death, right? He was very frightened and bore physical effects of his time in Omarska. You could see it. Isn't that right?" Tieger asked.

"No no, I didn't see any consequences. One could see a degree of exhaustion. I was very surprised. I do not scare anyone to death. After that, as far as I could follow, nothing happened to that man. In first few weeks after that event, I think he didn't have any problems whatsoever," Dodik said.

"Just so we don't get caught up in semantics, let's set aside [the phrase] 'scared to death'," Tieger suggested.

"I saw there was some fear, but I didn't see any physical marks of violence. Perhaps that was under his clothes, but I didn't see that," Dodik replied.

The Karadzic trial continues next week.

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