

## **Bralo**

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Judge says defendant committed a range of appalling crimes, which must be condemned unequivocally. The only Bosnian Croat to plead guilty before his trial began was sentenced this week to 20 years in prison.

Miroslav Bralo, known as “Cicko”, was found guilty for his role in the Ahmici massacre in central Bosnia in 1993. In a town where Muslims and Croats had lived together peacefully before the war, approximately 100 Muslims were killed in a single April day.

Earlier this year, he pleaded guilty to two counts of grave breaches of the Geneva conventions, two counts of war crimes and three violations of the laws or customs of war.

“The chamber accepts that his remorse is sincere and heartfelt and that he has undergone a personal transformation,” Presiding Judge Iain Bonomy said during the sentencing.

Bralo was a member of the Croatian Defence Council’s special unit called the “Jokers”. He admitted to killing 19 people, nine of whom were children aged seven to 17.

He also confessed to repeated rape and torture of one woman and using Bosnian Muslims as human shields.

Bonomy said the trial chamber had heard “evidence of the immense fear and distress felt by one of the family members” at the sentencing hearing.

He described witness statements, many of which Prosecutor Mark Harmon had read aloud to the court at the hearing, as “painting a picture of shattered lives and livelihood and of ongoing tremendous pain and trauma”.

After reading a summary of the charges against Bralo, Judge Bonomy told the court that as the crimes were of an “extremely serious and brutal nature”, without mitigating circumstances, he would have received 25 years, the minimum asked for by the prosecution.

He added that Bralo had “committed a range of appalling crimes which must be condemned unequivocally. There can be no excuse or reason for your actions, nor can your reasons for abusing so many people be fathomed”.

The mitigating factors listed by Bonomy included Bralo’s voluntary surrender, within days of the indictment against him being made public, and his guilty plea, which represented a “profound acknowledgement” of responsibility, coming well before his trial started, and had contributed to reconciliation in the region.

Bralo has also assisted the United Nations in locating the bodies of those killed in Ahmici. In 1997 he tried

to surrender to UN forces, confessing his role in the Ahmici massacre and saying he could no longer live with his conscience. The UN forces freed him by mistake not realising at the time that there was a sealed indictment against him.

Bonomy said that the trial chamber believed Bralo's "transformative process will continue as he serves his sentence and that his punishment will have a further rehabilitative effect".

"My apology should go further," Bralo said in a statement given to the court at the October 20 hearing. "It should be as big as the globe."

The Office of the Prosecutor told IWPR it was too early to say if they will appeal the sentence "because the judgment has only just been rendered".

Two others have been convicted of crimes committed during the Ahmici massacre, receiving sentences of 12 and 18 years. The longer sentence was given to the commander of the Jokers unit, Vladimir Santic.

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**Location:** Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Topic:** Courtside

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**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/bralo-0>