

Camps Trial Hears of Torture in Omarska

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A survivor of the Omarska prison camp tells Bosnian war crimes court of the horrors he witnessed in summer 1992.

"I still remember those terrible screams. I had never heard anything like that before. Those were the screams of people who were in excruciating pain, and who knew they were dying."

Utter silence fell on the spacious, elegant courtroom in the newly-built Bosnian War Crimes Chamber, as a survivor of the infamous Omarska detention camp in Prijedor described a terrifying scene he witnessed there on June 20, 1992, when several Muslim detainees were tortured to death.

"I wanted to look through the window and see what was going on, but my father didn't let me. He didn't want me to see this dreadful scene," the witness told the court.

The man, a prosecution witness testifying under the pseudonym K 017, was speaking at the Sarajevo trial of Bosnian Serbs Zeljko Mejakic, Momcilo Gruban, Dusan Fustar and Dusko Knezevic. All are indicted for crimes they are alleged to have committed in the Omarska and Keraterm detention camps in Prijedor, northwestern Bosnia, at the beginning of the 1992-95 Bosnian war.

According to the indictment, between May and August 1992 more than 7,000 non-Serb civilians from the Prijedor area were detained in the Omarska, Trnopolje and Keraterm camps, where they were confined in inhumane conditions, murdered, beaten, sexually assaulted and psychologically abused.

It is alleged that Mejakic was the commander of the Omarska facility at the time, while Gruban and Fustar were guard shift commanders in Omarska and Keraterm respectively.

The indictment alleges that Knezevic did not have any official title, but that he murdered and beat inmates at Omarska and Keraterm and participated in rapes and sexual abuse.

The four were originally indicted by the Hague tribunal, but their case was referred to the Bosnian War Crimes Chamber in April last year, in accordance with the tribunal's completion strategy. Since the tribunal has to wind up by 2010, only the highest-ranking suspects can be tried there, while lower-level cases are referred to local courts in the countries of former Yugoslavia.

The bodies of more than 2,000 Muslims, Croats and other non-Serbs from the Prijedor area have been exhumed from 53 mass graves and several hundred individual graves so far. Around 1,000 people are still unaccounted for.

The tribunal has tried several Bosnian Serbs for crimes committed in the Prijedor area and sentenced them to prison terms ranging from five to 40 years.

The trial of Mejakic and others started in Sarajevo in December, and is still in the prosecution phase

Witness K 017 was just 20 when he was captured after his home town of Kozarac fell into the hands of Bosnian Serb forces in late spring 1992. He was brought to Omarska at the end of May that year, together with his father and hundreds of other able-bodied men from Kozarac and Prijedor. His mother, sister and younger brother, meanwhile, were taken to Trnopolje, a camp designated for women and children.

The witness said June 20 that year was a day he would never forget. He was in a room packed with other prisoners on the first floor of the main building in Omarska when Dusko Tadic - a former Bosnian Serb

Democratic Party, SDS, leader from Kozarac, who was sentenced by the Hague tribunal to 20 years in prison for the cruel treatment of detainees in Omarska - called out the names of several prisoners and ordered them to come down to the hangar.

He said one of them, Emir Karabasic, was in the same room as him when Tadic called his name. "Someone offered him a jacket because we assumed he would be beaten and the jacket might soften the blows. But Emir, who probably knew he wouldn't be coming back, refused saying, 'I don't need anything any more'," the witness recalled.

He heard the first screams soon after Karabasic and several other men were summoned to the hangar.

He told the court that other detainees were looking through a small window at the hangar, but he was too afraid to look down.

"I heard someone shouting orders, 'Bite, Bite', and I recognized Dusko Tadic's voice. I couldn't see what was going on, but others who were watching the scene told me Tadic was ordering one Muslim prisoner to bite off Karabasic's testicles," he said.

He never saw Karabasic again.

This incident is described in Tadic's indictment, which alleges that Karabasic died as a result of these assaults, together with several other Muslim detainees who were also tortured that day.

Speaking of living conditions in the Omarska prison camp, witness K 017 said they were "dismal". The prisoners were not only interrogated, beaten and killed, but also kept short of food, he said.

"We would get only one meal a day, usually a piece of bread and some soup. We were starving," he told the court.

There were so many prisoners that they were forced to sleep on tiled floors, stairs and in the hallways, he said. There was no running water in the camp, so the toilets were incredibly dirty. The witness said this made the prison guards angry, and they often used the dirty toilets as an excuse to beat up prisoners.

The witness said he himself was beaten so severely that he remained unconscious for two days, because "one of the guards didn't like the smell in the toilet".

He also got dysentery, like many other detainees, and became very weak, but never received any medical treatment.

He told the court the conditions in the camp slightly improved when foreign journalists and the Red Cross began visiting the facility in August 1992.

However, before the first visits took place, most prisoners were taken to another location and only 174 remained in Omarska, including the witness. The guards instructed them to say they had been in the camp between five and 15 days at most and that they had been treated fairly.

"I told a French journalist who was interviewing me that I had only been there 17 days, but he knew I was lying," the witness recalled.

He said he was afraid to tell the truth because Mejakic was standing right behind the journalist, so he tried to make his story believable.

“But they saw how skinny and weak I was,” he added.

On August 21, the witness and other detainees were transferred to Manjaca and the Omarska camp was closed down. He was finally released on December 16.

In his cross-examination, Mejakic’s lawyer Jovan Simic pointed out that his client never personally harmed the witness. He also suggested that the lack of running water in Omarska was caused by frequent power cuts in the wider Prijedor area which meant that pump systems did not work.

The four accused, especially Grubar and Knezevic, appeared relaxed during this week’s hearings at the Sarajevo court. Knezevic exchanged jokes with one of the guards during the break. Grubar smiled and winked at someone sitting in the public gallery, which, unlike the public galleries at the Hague tribunal, is not divided by a glass panel from the courtroom.

The trial continues next week.

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