

Child Soldiers Allegedly Helped Pillage Bogoro

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Witness recounts how child soldiers wielding spears looted Ituri village.

A prosecution witness in the trial of alleged Congolese warlords Germain Katanga and Mathieu Ngudjolo this week described how child soldiers armed with arrows and spears helped to pillage the Ituri village of Bogoro.

Katanga and Ngudjolo are together charged by International Criminal Court, ICC, prosecutors with war crimes and crimes against humanity, including murder, rape, pillaging and the enlistment and recruiting of child in relation to the 2003 attack on Bogoro.

Giving testimony with face and voice distortion, Witness 268 told the court that he saw children who were between eight to 10 years old, and up to the age of 15, carrying spears and arrows during the attack. He said that he did not see any child soldiers using rifles.

“They were smashing the houses, and they were going through the different goods,” the witness said.

According to his testimony, the children destroyed houses by taking sheet metal off the roofs and looted other property in the village.

The witness, a Bogoro resident who said he was of Hema ethnicity, told the court that the assailants, including men, women and children, were of Lendu and Ngiti ethnicity.

The Lendu and Ngiti groups are allegedly represented by the Patriotic Resistance Force, FRPI, and National Integrationist Front, FNI, respectively. Conflict between the Lendu and Ngiti and the Hema ethnic group plagued the Ituri region of the Democratic Republic of Congo from 1999-2003.

Ngudjolo is alleged to have been the leader of the FNI, while Katanga allegedly led the FRPI.

The witness said he was in Bogoro on the morning of February 24, 2003 when he heard shots and fled with some other villagers to hide in the bush.

He described how he saw other civilians hiding, fleeing and being “hacked into pieces with machetes” during the attack. The witness said he saw and heard all of these things while hiding from the assailants.

After being discovered in his hiding place by members of the FRPI and FNI, the witness said he was tied up and taken to the Bogoro Institute, a local school and a former camp for the Union of Congolese Patriots, UPC.

UPC soldiers had controlled Bogoro before the alleged attack by FRPI and FNI forces on the village.

The witness said he was kept tied up in a classroom overnight with many dead bodies, belonging mainly to women and children as young as two years old.

“They were injuries caused by spears, machetes, bullets,” the witness said. “At one point I came across a two-year-old child who was dead. He had been hacked with machetes.”

Though he did not recognise most of the victims, the witness said he identified the body of a Hema woman named Harriet, in her thirties who worked in a restaurant in Bogoro. He said she had been struck in the neck and knee, apparently with a machete.

The witness told the court that the FRPI and FNI forces had often attacked Bogoro before the final strike on February 24, in which some 200 people were allegedly killed and much of the village destroyed by fire.

The trial will continue next week.

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