

Claims of Mutilation and Torture in Medak Pocket

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Horrible details of alleged crimes by Croatian forces revealed at trial of two Croatian army generals. A Zagreb war crimes court this week heard claims that Croatian soldiers mutilated corpses and abused prisoners during the 1993 Medak Pocket operation.

The testimony was given in closed session via video link last week, but was not revealed to the public until Judge Marin Mrcela read the transcripts out in court.

One witness, identified only as number 15, described finding a woman dead inside a house.

“She was lying on the floor, naked as if she was just born. Her head was cut off and a little separated from her body and her breasts were cut into slices. Excuse my expression, she was cut through, from vagina to breasts,” the judge quoted the witness as saying.

The testimony of such witnesses is central to the prosecution’s case against Generals Mirko Norac and Rahim Ademi, who are accused of commanding Croatian Army, HV, troops that killed prisoners and unlawfully destroyed civilian property during the operation.

According to the original indictment, at least 29 Serb civilians were killed and dozens more wounded in the operation, which sought to regain control of part of Croatia held by Serb rebels. Many of the victims were women or elderly.

Of the nine protected witnesses whose evidence was read out this week, eight now live in Serbia and one in Norway. Some of them were members of Serbian forces, while others were from the Medak area and were called in to identify their neighbours’ bodies.

Their statements allege mass looting, killing and torturing by HV soldiers. Previous witnesses had spoken about such alleged crimes, but none had produced the same level of horrible detail.

Witness number 15 went on to describe seeing how Croatian soldiers hanged a man from a tree.

“A few men practiced their knife throwing by throwing their knives at the man while he was hanging,” said the testimony.

“I couldn’t tell if the man was alive or not. Later I saw how they took him down from the tree, tied him to a car and dragged him around the village.”

Other witnesses described being beaten and abused after they were taken prisoner. Often, they said, the torture would continue when they were taken to prison in the towns of Gospic and Karlovac, or to the

barracks in Rijeka.

“From these beatings I fell unconscious and when I came back I saw a Croatian soldier had doused me with water. Afterwards we got beaten with bats as well,” one witness was quoted as saying.

“At one moment a soldier and policeman entered and chased all the others out saying to them that they mustn’t beat us.”

The defendants repeatedly interrupted Judge Mrcela’s reading of the transcripts, saying that the Croatian forces had not behaved in that way.

After the HV took the Medak Pocket, whence Serbian artillery had shelled Croatian positions for two years, it came under strong international pressure to withdraw. Eventually, they agreed to hand over control to the United Nations’ UNPROFOR troops.

This week, the court was shown video footage shot by the Reuters news agency during UNPROFOR’s arrival in the area.

It was clear in the film that the villages had been completely destroyed. The cameraman also filmed graphic images of the bodies of around 50 dead Serbs, while their relatives and neighbours tried to identify them.

The film also showed how the Croatian troops had blocked the advance of the UN force. The then UNPROFOR commander, Canadian Ove Nielsen, was shown telling reporters that the HV would not let his troops through.

One HV officer insisted that his superior officers had to be present during the retreat and, while arguing with UNPROFOR, mentioned Norac by name as one of the commanders he was waiting for.

Norac told the court it was impossible that the HV officer on the film was waiting for him “because I didn’t have jurisdiction to communicate with them (UNPROFOR)”.

Another UNPROFOR officer, Marc Rouleau, told the camera crew that they had clashed a few times with the Croatians when entering Medak but that no one had died from the shooting. He also said how UNPROFOR had given the HV an ultimatum to pull back to the agreed line or come under fire.

A third officer, who was not identified, told the camera, “We found completely destroyed property in this area and found the remains of 10 bodies.”

He confirmed to the reporter that some of the civilians appeared to have been executed around 24 hours before UNPROFOR entered the area.

When speaking about the destruction of property, the officer said he thought it was planned “in the sense that it was committed before we came, absolutely, I think they wanted to be sure that nothing would remain before we entered”.

The trial continues on February 20 this year when Nielsen should take the stand followed by six other former UNPROFOR officers.

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