

Continuing Testimony in Blaskic

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A Bosnian doctor describes the rising ethnic tensions leading to war, the battle for Vitez, and the atrocities that followed.

In the continuing trial of Croat General Tihomir Blaskic, much of last week was taken up by the testimony of Dr Muhmed Mujezinovic, director of the Health Centre in Vitez. Blaskic stands accused of war crimes against Muslim civilians in the River Lasva valley in Central Bosnia, in the spring of 1993.

As a member of the Council for the Protection of the Interests of Muslims, Mujezinovic was spared the persecution to which the Muslim population of Vitez was subjected at the end of 1992 and the first half of 1993. Mujezinovic was one of those who remained in the town, where he treated wounded Croat soldiers in hospital.

Dr Mujezinovic described how the rise in ethnic tensions eventually spilled over into war. The first incidents took place in May 1992 when two Muslim soldiers of the BH Army were heavily beaten and one killed. In June, soldiers of the Croatian Defence Council (HVO) took over the local police station, disarmed the Muslim policemen and hoisted the flags of Herzeg-Bosnia and Republic of Croatia on the building. Local Croat leaders, whom Dr Mujezinovic had known personally, started to describe the area as "the historic Croat land" belonging to so-called Herzeg-Bosnia. These leaders he said, had warned the Muslims not to resist the Croat authorities, saying that 90 per cent of the Croats were armed. Only 10 per cent of the Muslims reportedly had weapons.

Dr Mujezinovic added that local Croat leaders made subsequent demands that all local units of the BH Army were to be put under the HVO command, and the local police placed under the command of the police of "Herzeg-Bosnia". The HVO went on to establish its own, single-national municipal authorities, demanding that the Muslims employed in the administration sign the statement of allegiance to the new government. The HVO even set up checkpoints around the town, limiting the movement of Muslims and requisitioning their vehicles and the goods they were transporting. A systematic destruction of Muslim businesses in Vitez followed. By the spring of 1993, the vast majority of shops belonging to Muslims had been looted, blown up else burnt down.

The Muslims responded by founding the Co-ordination Council for the Protection of the Interests of Muslims, which publicly condemned these human rights violations while attempting to begin a dialogue with the local Croat leaders. In January 1993 they also founded the War Presidency of Vitez, inviting the Croats to join in. The HVO refused, however, asserting that Vitez was "a part of Herzeg-Bosnia and the historic Croat land."

On 16 April 1993 the HVO launched an attack on the Muslim part of Vitez and all the Muslim villages in Lasva valley. Mujezinovic heard of the attack on Ahmici from the nurses who treated wounded Croat soldiers alongside him. In tears, the nurses claimed how all the Croats were evacuated from the village at 1am and that the attack started four hours later. A total of 118 Muslims, mostly women, children and the elderly, were reportedly massacred, and the entire village then burnt to the ground.

Mujezinovic told the court how he entered the village seven days later and was shocked by what he saw. He added that all Muslims in Ahmici had handed over their weapons to the HVO back in November 1992, saying that they wanted to live in peace with the Croats. "None of those people survived" - he said, in clear distress.

The BH Army launched a strong counter-attack on the HVO forces around Vitez on 19 April. The town's HVO brigade commander Mario Cerkez who is also accused of war crimes, summoned Mujezinovic and demanded he call the BH Army HQ in Zenica as well as President Izetbegovic in Sarajevo, to tell them that more than 2,200 Muslim prisoners would be killed unless the counter-attack was halted. Mujezinovic followed his orders and received guarantees from both Zenica and Sarajevo that the BH Army would not enter Vitez.

Under cross-examination, Mujezinovic refused to accept the defence suggestion that armed gangs and paramilitary groups from other parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina terrorised civilians and were responsible for the crimes in Vitez and its surroundings. When asked the same question by one of the judges, Mujezinovic replied, "I think there was one army. They had a chain of command. I believe they received orders and some local HVO people helped them."

The defence tried to make a similar suggestion to Lars Baggensen, a major in the Danish Army and a

former member of the European Community Monitoring Mission (ECMM) in Bosnia. Baggensen, whose testimony began last week, confirmed that many special units were operating in and around Vitez. However, he stressed that: "if someone is given arms, the one who has handed out the weapons is responsible for the acts of those whom he has armed. The commander is always responsible for his men."

Baggensen, who specialises in intelligence and reconnaissance, was a member of ECMM in Zenica from 30 March until 1 July 1993 and kept a war diary about events. He assessed that HVO operations were well planned, co-ordinated and led at a senior level. He also gave a positive assessment of the system of communication in the HVO: Blaskic he said, was definitely able to communicate with whomever he wanted.

Baggensen explained how even ECMM monitors could not pass HVO checkpoints without the written approval of Blaskic. The major told the court of passing by Ahmici on 16 April 1993 and seeing it in flames. HVO soldiers however refused him entry. Baggensen returned several days later and concluded that a fire of such proportions could not have been caused by artillery or mortar fire, but was deliberately started. "The attack on the village," he said, "was a planned military operation."

Baggensen was in Zenica on 19 April 1993, when the town was shelled and one grenade hit the local market killing 15 and heavily wounding another 36 people. He took part in the analysis of the crater left by the explosion, and was left in no doubt that the 122mm mortar grenade had been fired from HVO positions. Interestingly, he suggested that the HVO had attempted to frighten the Croats in Zenica by shelling them and so force them out of this predominantly Muslim town, and into Vitez which had already been "ethnically cleansed".

One of the Muslim expelled from the town testified last week. When the HVO attack on the Muslim part of Vitez began on 16 April, Sefik Pezer, a local factory worker was imprisoned in a cellar of the local cinema for two weeks. Soldiers would occasionally take Muslim captives to dig trenches on the front line. Prisoners who were members of the Muslim Party for Democratic Action (SDA), or had connections with the BH Army, were transferred to the camp in Busovaca. Four days after Pezer's release, HVO soldiers came to his flat and ordered him and his family to leave.

A truck, with several Muslim families in it, was waiting for them in front of the building. The truck took them to the last HVO check-point, where they were ordered to cross into Muslim-held territory. From former neighbours and friends whom he met later in Zenica, Pezer heard that one hundred families were expelled from Vitez that day.

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