

COURTSIDE: Bosanski Samac Trial

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Trial highlights media's role in turning Serbs against their Muslim and Croat neighbours.

The prosecution continued the trial last week of four Serbs accused of organising the ethnic cleansing of Muslims and Croats in 1992 in Bosanski Samac, north-east Bosnia, on the border with Croatia.

Testifying against Simo Zaric, a former policeman who became a commander of the IV detachment, a territorial defence unit set up by the Yugoslav People's Army, JNA, mainly comprising Serb volunteers and reservists, Izet Izetbegovic recalled his role in a propaganda film made for Serbian television, which was used to justify the violent Serb take-over of Bosanski Samac to the Serbian public.

Excerpts from the programme, entitled "Preparations for Genocide in Bosanski Samac", put out by TV Novi Sad, were shown as part of his testimony.

Izetbegovic, a former vice-president of the local Muslim Party of Democratic Action, SDA, and a relative of the then Bosnian president, Alija Izetbegovic, played a key role in the programme.

The film tried to prove Muslims and Croats in Bosanski Samac were preparing a genocide against Serbs and suggested that only the "timely intervention" of the JNA and Serb paramilitaries prevented this by seizing the town and arresting all local Muslim and Croat leaders on the night of April 16, 1992.

The key source of information about the "genocidal plans" was Simo Zaric, who was seen in the programme waving lists of "conspirators" among the local Muslim and Croat leaders as well as documents about arms they allegedly brought from Croatia and elsewhere for the purpose of the genocide.

That was shown with footage of weapons allegedly confiscated in the conspirators' headquarters along with their "symbols of hatred and fear", namely green SDA and Croatian red-and-white flags.

On camera, the reporter, Minja Pavlovic, asked Zaric if the detained Muslim and Croat leaders would "give statements voluntarily about those events", to which Zaric replied that they would certainly agree and admit their criminal role in preparing the genocide.

Local Muslim and Croat leaders - Izetbegovic among them - took turns in front of the camera to confess they had obtained weapons not exactly for the purpose of genocide, but in order to take over Bosanski Samac. They talked of the "madness" and of the "arms psychosis" that had gripped them.

Some of those interviewed were brought from the military prison in Brcko, while Izetbegovic was brought from an improvised jail in the Territorial Defence building in Bosanski Samac.

In his testimony to the court last week, Izetbegovic said that before they were brought to the police station to be interviewed, they were sent home to take a bath and put on clean suits to conceal the effects of two weeks of beatings.

The journalist gave them sunglasses to conceal bruises to their eyes - although Izetbegovic wounds were still visible, as were injuries to his hands from beatings.

He told the court that the interviewees answered the journalist's questions in the presence of armed, uniformed men, including Zaric and the then police chief Stevan Todorovic, who although one of the defendants has admitted guilt and agreed to testify against his co-accused.

The interviewees were brought to the studio - in reality the police HQ - by armed soldiers who guarded the doors and returned them to prison. The journalist insisted on the "voluntary" nature of their confessions and asked Izetbegovic and the others if they agreed that everything they had said should be broadcast. They replied, "Of course".

The use of the Serbian propaganda film in the Bosanski Samac trial will help throw light on the role of the media in the wars attending the break-up of Yugoslavia and the crimes that accompanied them.

So far no journalist or editor has figured among the 15 accomplices of Slobodan Milosevic listed in the indictment for crimes committed in Croatia in 1991 and 1992 (see Tribunal Update 239).

However, part of the indictment that lists ways in which Slobodan Milosevic and his accomplices took part in their "joint criminal enterprise" in Croatia refers to the media.

It says they "controlled, contributed to, or otherwise utilised Serbian state-run media outlets to manipulate Serbian public opinion by spreading exaggerated and false messages of ethnically-based attacks by Croats against Serb people in order to create an atmosphere of fear and hatred among Serbs living in Serbia and Croatia."

"The propaganda generated by the Serbian media was an important tool in contributing to the perpetration of crimes in Croatia," it adds.

"Preparations for Genocide" was not the worst example of its kind, though it illustrates the way in which the Serbian media freely acted as "an important tool" in the perpetration of crimes.

Unlike Rwanda - where the Hutu-controlled Radio Mille Collines directly called for the "extermination of [ethnic Tutsi] Cockroaches" - the media in the former Yugoslavia mainly refrained from direct calls for extermination.

Their message was not "go and kill them" but "they are coming to kill you!". The effect was the same, however; to dehumanise an opposing ethnic group to such an extent that, as was stated in the tribunal's sentence on Dusko Tadic, "the moral brakes on killing" were released.

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