

COURTSIDE: Prijedor Genocide Trial

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Reporter reveals details of 1996 interview with defendant.

In the midst of a heated debate over whether journalists should testify in court, British reporter Ed Vulliamy returned to the tribunal for the fifth time last week to recount his visit to the Bosnian detention camps.

Vulliamy, who worked for The Guardian newspaper, visited Omarska and Trnopolje camps in 1992 with ITN's Penny Marshall and Ian Williams at the invitation of the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, who asked the western media to "see for themselves that there are no concentration camps" in Serb-controlled areas of Bosnia.

The invitation backfired on Karadzic after the journalists returned with harrowing pictures of prisoners reduced to skin and bone who were too terrified to speak to the visitors.

Vulliamy was testifying during the trial of Milomir Stakic, president of Prijedor's Serb crisis staff, who is accused of coordinating the persecution of non-Serbs in the area and of setting up detention camps.

The journalist previously testified in the trials of Tihomir Blaskic, Dusko Tadic, Milan Kovacevic and three Keraterm camp guards. His statements were based on his 1992 visit to the camps and also on information garnered from interviews conducted with Kovacevic and Stakic after the war, in 1996.

The court has already heard details of Vulliamy's conversation with Kovacevic - who was Stakic's deputy - but never about the dialogue with Stakic.

In his 1996 interview with the Guardian reporter, Stakic said Croats and Muslims committed grave crimes against Serbs in the Second World War. He said that in the Nineties, the new Croatian flag and the country's president Franjo Tudjman had reminded the Serbs of the fascist Ustasha.

Stakic claimed the Serbs faced the question of whether to "fall on their knees and go to Jasenovac" - the Ustasha-run concentration camp for Serbs in the Second World War - "for the second time".

While the accused had claimed that Omarska was an "investigation centre", Vulliamy's 1992 visit to the camp suggested otherwise.

He was not allowed to inspect the camp but only to visit the canteen, where he saw a group of some 30 men hastily eating soup and bread - their only meal of the day. The look and physical appearance of these men "told us what they couldn't say", Vulliamy told the court. One prisoner told him, "I don't want to tell you lies, but I cannot tell you the truth".

The journalists were then taken to Trnopolje, where they were allowed to speak to prisoners held behind barbed wire. These men claimed to have newly arrived from Omarska and Keraterm, and spoke of murders and massacres in those camps.

Vulliamy's three-day testimony was followed by that of a witness subpoenaed by the trial chamber. Dusan Baltic, a former secretary of the Prijedor municipal assembly, had been called to explain how the body functioned during the war.

Baltic, who had objected to appearing in court, repeatedly avoided giving direct answers to questions, but eventually revealed that the person with highest authority over the parliament at the time was its president, Stakic.

He said it had been transformed into a crisis staff after the Serb takeover, but claimed that he was not a member of the latter. The witness said he attended meetings only when "he was invited to explain some expert or technical question".

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