

COURTSIDE: Prijedor Genocide Trial

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Accused explained Serb intentions in video interview

A video interview with the defendant Milomir Stakic, charged with genocide and other war crimes in Prijedor municipality in 1992, was shown to the tribunal last week.

The December 1992 interview featured an ITN journalist asking Stakic to comment on the killings and destruction of Muslim property in the area, the establishment of detention centres, and on the history of local ethnic relations.

The prosecution may use the interview in place of direct testimony by the defendant, which he may lawfully refuse to give.

In the taped interview, Stakic described himself as president of the municipal assembly and said detention centres were necessary as it had not been possible to establish peaceful relations and power sharing between Serbs and the Croats and Muslims, whose extremists had resorted to force and had murdered soldiers and police.

Stakic described the Omarska camp - where the indictment says hundreds of detainees were tortured and killed - as an "investigative centre set up to identify extremists" and said the rest were allowed to return home. He said 1,350 men who were found "guilty" were transferred to the Manjaca camp. Stakic insisted torture was not used in Omarska and deaths occurred only from "natural causes".

As for the centre at Trnopolje, Stakic claimed Muslims were sheltering there from their own extremists. The accused told the interviewer many people went to the camps voluntarily, to be transferred to other countries with the help of humanitarian agencies.

"We never declared war on the entire Muslim people..only (struggled) against the extremists, those who did not want co-existence here... [and who] had prepared programs for extermination of the Serbian people from these areas," Stakic said in the interview.

But when turning to the local history of ethnic relations, Stakic took a strong line against non-Serbs. He recalled that whereas the Serbs supported the Allies in two world wars, the Croats and Muslims - whom he called an "artificial nation" (as they were Slavs who converted to Islam under Turkish rule) - fought for the pro-Nazi Croatian Ustashe. He said that while the Serbs had "generously" forgiven these crimes, when the Croatian Democratic Union appeared in the 1990s and revived the Ustashe symbols, the Serbs could take it no longer.

The indictment says the Serbs attacked the local Muslim village of Kozarac, looted the people's belongings and destroyed their houses and sent the survivors to detention camps, where hundreds were beaten and killed.

However, in the ITN interview Stakic claimed the destruction of Kozarac was a consequence of battles fought between Serbs and Muslims, as the latter had blocked a vital road and attacked vehicles belonging to the former. After their homes were destroyed, the locals could not remain in the village, he said, which was why they sought shelter in Trnopolje or went elsewhere.

"We organised buses and a train for them, for free, just so that they could leave in order to prevent any new casualties and the genocide for which we have already been blamed for in Europe," he said. "It is better for them to leave, and tomorrow, when the war ends ... those among them who want to return will be allowed to do so."

Witness Ivo Atlija, a Croat miner, testified earlier on killings and lootings in the Serb attack on the village of Bisevo in June 1992. "No one has returned to live in Bisevo," he said.

Atlija escaped to Bisevo from Prijedor when he lost his job following the Serbian takeover of the town. The occupation was preceded by months of Serb propaganda, he said, when non-Serbs were all labelled Ustasha and Baliija - a derogatory term for a Muslim. Consequently, the Serb population became afraid of their Croat and Muslim neighbours.

The police arrested several people in Bisevo on June 24, while others were ordered to report to the police station. These men never returned, said Atlija, but were taken away to detention centres.

The witness testified that, a month later, the village was shelled and invaded by Serb soldiers. Atlija hid, and when the troops withdrew he found burned houses and 68 corpses scattered around. He also saw a pile of corpses in nearby Kureva forest, which he claimed were those of Muslim refugees from surrounding villages who had tried to escape.

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Focus: International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia

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