

COURTSIDE: Prijedor Trial

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By Vjera Bogati in The Hague (TU 295, 6-10 January 2003)

He is accused of genocide against non-Serbs in the northern Bosnian municipality.

"The testimony of Biljana Plavsic will assist the chamber in finding the truth" about events in Prijedor in 1992, concluded the court, presided over by German judge Wolfgang Schomburg.

The judges explained that they want to question Plavsic about the "purported joint criminal enterprise of which Stakic allegedly formed a part together with Plavsic" and the possible meetings between the two.

Plavsic, who is yet to be sentenced, has a "duty to answer to all the question the court may have," said Schomburg.

The former Bosnian Serb leader pleaded guilty last year after she reached an agreement with the prosecution, where a number of counts in the original indictment against her were dropped.

The agreement said nothing about testifying in other cases, but prosecutors clearly feel she has much to offer. The Hague's rules say that witnesses can be compelled to testify if the need is great enough.

"It is not up to Plavsic to decide whether she will or will not testify," said Schomburg.

He added that those accused have the right to remain silent in cases when they may incriminate themselves. Since Plavsic has already pleaded guilty, that right no longer applies to her.

Schomburg suggested that Stakic should consider changing his plea to guilty. He asked the prosecution if they would be ready to drop charges of genocide, as they did in case of Plavsic, if that was to happen.

Stakic's defence team is currently presenting its evidence. At the beginning of 1992, the accused's lawyers told the court, the population of Prijedor was stricken with "madness and nationalist hatred".

Two Serb politicians - Stakic and Dr Milan Kovacevic - tried to find a peaceful solution to the conflict between Bosniaks and Serbs, testified the latter's widow, Ljubica.

Kovacevic, who died in detention in 1998, was accused of genocide along with Stakic.

The prosecutors say the crisis committee - a Serb ad hoc local government - took over the town and threw many non-Serbs into detention camps.

Ljubica Kovacevic, however, claimed that civilian leaders were not responsible for these crimes, and that

they were "unable to influence the police and army forces which looted, detained and killed the non-Serb population" in the region.

"The atmosphere of fear" among the people was caused by expulsion of Serbs from Croatia, Slovenia and other parts of former Yugoslavia, she said.

As evidence, she offered the court a CD-ROM containing personal data of more than 32,000 Serbian refugees who came from various parts of former Yugoslavia and settled in Prijedor in the period from 1991 to 1997.

Asked about the influence her husband had on local law enforcement and especially the head of police - the late Simo Drljaca, who was also accused of genocide - Kovacevic replied that "Mico had no influence over an ordinary traffic policeman, let alone Drljaca. He did not like him", claiming that the police chief had once pulled a gun on her husband.

She testified that she knew about the camps during the war but, on the sparse information relayed by her husband, she had thought these were simply prisons for the people "who did something wrong".

The witness also claimed that Kovacevic had suffered a lot because of what was going on. "Once he came home in a bad mood and said `This is madness. We are mad people', " she said, adding that he was referring not only to Serbs, but all Prijedor citizens who succumbed to "the lowest human passions".

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