

COURTSIDE: Tuta and Stela Trial

Prosecution concludes its case.

The prosecution in the trial of the former commander of a notorious Bosnian Croat army, HVO, unit, Mladen "Tuta" Naleitic, and his sub-commander Vinko "Stela" Martinovic, concluded its case last week.

During their four and a half month long presentation of evidence, the prosecutors submitted some 2000 exhibits and called 73 witnesses - most were Bosniak former detainees at the HVO-run Heliodrom camp - who bore protected identity due to fears for their safety.

Stela and his Convicts Battalion unit are charged with using some of the detainees as human shields along the Mostar front line in the late summer of 1993. Other witnesses were Bosniak soldiers captured in the villages of Sovici and Doljani - some of whom were tortured and witnessed executions which they said were overseen by Tuta.

There were also a number of witnesses from the HVO ranks. German and Danish former mercenaries in Stela's unit testified that they had participated in planned attacks on Bosniaks in Mostar and in the use of detainees as human shields by the HVO during the attacks. A Bosniak ex member of the HVO told how his Convicts Battalion unit took part in the ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks in west Mostar.

Numerous witnesses, foreign journalists and Bosniak officials, described the destruction of the eastern side of town by HVO artillery and the months of suffering of civilians who did not have food, water or proper medical and humanitarian aid.

The final prosecution witness, a former member of the European monitoring mission and later of the EU administration in Mostar, Sir Martin Garrod, described his contacts with high-ranking HVO officials during which time he learned of their intention to drive the Bosniak population out of Mostar, which they had designated as capital of the self-proclaimed Bosnian Croat republic of Herceg-Bosna.

The HVO's pounding of east Mostar to rubble and the systematic displacement of Bosniaks must have required considerable planning and logistics, concluded Garrod, dismissing theories that the crimes were committed by "uncontrollable elements". He said that HVO operations were closely controlled by the Bosnian Croat political leadership, which, in turn, was closely influenced by the Croatian government.

In common with a number of other witnesses, Garrod spoke of the presence of Croatian Army, HV, troops in combat operations in Herzegovina. The prosecution will use such testimonies to prove that the Mostar conflict was international in nature, thereby requiring all parties to adhere to the Geneva conventions.

It is unclear exactly when the defence will commence their case. They are expected to ask the court to recess for at least two months while they prepare detailed responses to the prosecution charges.

Vjera Bogati is an IWPR special correspondent at The Hague and a journalist with SENSE News Agency.