

## **COURTSIDE: Tuta & Stela Trial**

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Stela "saved my life", claims Muslim witness

Vinko "Stela" Martinovic's defence team argued last week that the accused played no role in the abuse of Muslim prisoners in the local Croat-held Heliodrom camp and that, if anything, he "alleviated their suffering the best way he could".

After the Croat-Muslim conflict began in Bosnia in spring 1992, Heliodrom was allegedly one of a series of camps set up by the Croatian Defence Council, HVO, to detain Muslim civilians. The prosecution claims detainees were abused, used for digging trenches, and treated as human shields.

Two former Muslim inmates from Heliodrom last week contested the claims in the indictment that Stela - as the subordinate to his co-accused Mladen "Tuta" Naletilic and commander of the Mrmak military unit - abused detainees by using them as forced labour and imprisoned them in his headquarters, along with other crimes he allegedly committed in the Mostar area of Herzegovina.

The first witness, a former member of the Bosnian army imprisoned in the camp in 1993 and whose identity was protected, said Stela only took away Heliodrom prisoners "to protect them".

He said that in later stages of the conflict, when all the trenches had been dug, the inmates had nothing to do so they "sat in front of [Stela's] headquarters, reading papers and playing cards". Prisoners often volunteered for labour on the front line to chat with friends fighting there, he added.

From September 1993, he said, those taken from the camp often chose not to return but stayed with Stela's unit, eating together with the soldiers, and "feeling safe".

The witness claimed he had never seen his fellow prisoners being abused and added that Stela helped him to leave Heliodrom. In detention, the accused allegedly enabled him to visit his parents whenever he wanted, and said these favours were open to all the inmates.

"He saved my life and I thank him for it," the witness said, adding that he immediately decided to testify in Stela's defense on hearing that he had been indicted.

Another Muslim witness testified on the alleged Croat assault on Mostar in May 1993. The indictment charges both Tuta and Stela with participating in the attack, during which Muslims were persecuted and sent to local camps.

The protected witness said that the Bosnian Croat soldiers took all the Muslim families to a Mostar stadium, where he was recognised by an HVO soldier and taken out of the group. The others were taken to Heliodrom and freed after ten days.

The witness remained in the Croat-controlled part of Mostar after most of his Muslim neighbours had left. He said Stela told him there was no need to leave and that he would be protected. "I trusted him," he said.

The tribunal heard how four Croat soldiers had later tried to expel Muslims from the area but were punished when this news was reported to Stela. One soldier gave the witness a document certifying that he was a member of a Croat unit - although he was never given arms - and Stela visited daily to check that he was fine. The trial continues

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**Location:** Bosnia and  
Herzegovina

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