

COURTSIDE: Tuta & Stela Trial

One-time Bosnian Croat commander claims Naletilic never ordered a military action.

A controversial former HVO commander blamed for blowing up Mostar's historic stone bridge testified in the trial of Mladen "Tuta" Naletilic, accused of crimes committed in south-west Bosnia in 1993.

Slobodan Praljak, HVO overall commander in the latter half of 1993, was often linked in the media to the destruction of the Old Bridge in November that year. But he maintained he stepped down from his post two days before the infamous incident, and has been granted "safe passage" to testify, meaning he cannot be charged while giving evidence in court.

Most of his testimony concerned the HVO fight against the Yugoslav army and Serbian forces in 1992 and the arrival of Islamic Mujahedin in Bosnia, which he said led to the "Islamicisation" of Bosniak forces.

Naletilic's defence counsel, Kresimir Krsnik, intends to prove that regular Bosnian army caused the conflict, not a Croat plan to make Mostar the capital of a Bosnian Croat state (Herceg-Bosna), by ethnically cleansing the town of its Bosniak population.

Praljak said no regular Croatian army units were present in Bosnia, disputing Zagreb's alleged involvement in the Croat-Bosniak conflict and its international nature. Praljak claimed his simultaneous service in the Croatian army and the HVO was not proof of a connection, as his service in Bosnia was "voluntary".

The prosecution saw matters differently, presenting documents from the office of the late Croatian president Franjo Tudjman, one of which said Tudjman would dispatch Praljak to central Bosnia to help the HVO forces there.

Praljak spoke only briefly about Tuta, claiming the former Convicts' Battalion leader had no place in the HVO chain of command. He said he never witnessed the defendant order a military action, and only saw him participate in one.

Although he explained that "special units" like Convicts' Battalion fell under the auspices of the defence department of Herceg-Bosna, he failed to clarify who exactly ordered Naletilic's actions. He created extra confusion by declaring that the "anti-terrorist unit" led by the defendant's co-accused, Vinko Martinovic Stela, did not come under Tuta's command, contradicting statements by other witnesses.

After Prljak said "the chain of command led to me", the prosecution said this implied that the witness was responsible for the actions of the anti-terrorist units, including the expulsions and maltreatment of Bosniak detainees. Praljak denied that this was the case.

The prosecution seemed more interested in establishing Praljak's responsibility than in hearing what he had to say about the defendant. In his own words, he was an "occasional and informal commander" of HVO units in the Mostar area throughout 1993 until he became commander of the entire HVO that July.

The prosecution claimed units under Praljak ethnically cleansed the south-western town of Stolac of its Bosniak population and destroyed its four mosques, just as Tudjman spoke publicly of Stolac's strategic significance to the Croats and of the need to settle Bosnian Croat refugees there. He was also accused of

superior responsibility for the HVO attack on Prozor and its subsequent ethnic cleansing.

Praljak declared that this was "a shameless lie" and that he had tried to calm the situation there. "I performed my job honourably," he said. After the defence complained that the Bosnian media were proclaiming Praljak an accused man, Judge Maureen Clark reassured him he was a witness, "and will be treated as a witness".

However, Praljak would not be the first general from ex-Yugoslavia to appear in court first as a witness and then as accused, as this is precisely what happened to two Bosnian army commanders, Sefer Halilovic and Enver Hadzihasanovic. The trial continues.

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