

Defence Prepare Case in Srebrenica Trial

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Judges want to save time by reducing witness numbers in a trial involving seven defendants. A hearing in the trial of seven Bosnian Serb army and police officers charged with taking part in the Srebrenica massacre in summer 1995 took place at the Hague tribunal this week, after a break that followed the end of the prosecution's case.

Ljubisa Beara, Vujadin Popovic, Ljubomir Borovcanin, Vinko Pandurevic and Drago Nikolic face charges of genocide and war crimes, while Radivoj Miletic and Milan Gvero are charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity.

According to the indictment, Popovic was assistant commander in charge of security on the staff of the Bosnian Serb army's Drina Corps, Pandurevic was in command of the Drina Corps's Zvornik brigade, while Nikolic was chief of security in the same brigade.

The prosecution says that at the time of the Srebrenica massacre in July 1995, Beara was chief of security on the Bosnian Serb army staff, while Gvero and Miletic were on the army staff. Borovcanin is believed to have been deputy commander of a special police brigade subordinated to the Republika Srpska interior ministry.

All seven have pleaded not guilty to all the charges against them.

This week, judges organised a pre-defence conference to discuss the possibility of reducing the number of witnesses, so as to save trial time.

The presiding judge, Carmel Agius, said the three-month break was designed to give the defendants' lawyers more preparatory time so they could reduce the defence to cover only what was essential.

Agius singled out Ljubisa Beara's defence, saying what it proposed to present was "too extensive". John Ostojic, Beara's counsel, promised the judges that his team would "reduce the number of witnesses by 20 to 25 per cent" after meetings with the prosecution office.

During this week's hearing, the defence teams took it in turn to tell the judges how many witnesses they could cut from their original lists.

The judges will make a decision about the final schedule for the defence case after receiving revised witness lists from the legal teams.

Popovic's defence will start its case on June 2, followed by Beara's.

This week's hearing was stopped for 45 minutes when Gvero asked for a recess because he felt unwell.

His defence counsel, David Josse, criticised the appeals chamber's recent decision not to approve Gvero's request to be released for a period of time on health grounds.

"Mr Gvero is all right for the time being, however we don't know if he will be well enough throughout the proceedings as this is a very long trial that has already lasted [a long time]," said Josse.

The prosecution suggested that in the circumstances, Gvero's defence should come first, but judges ruled that the order would remain as it was in the indictment. If Gvero were too ill to stand trial, they would decide at that time how to proceed, they said.

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