

Detainee Speaks of Prijedor Camp Abuses

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Witness tells court of “hostile and inhumane” conditions at Omarska detention centre.

The trial of former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic continued this week with the testimony of a former Bosniak prison camp detainee who spoke of the murder and abuse of Bosniaks and Croats in the Prijedor area in 1992.

Prijedor is one of 21 municipalities listed in the indictment against Karadzic. According to the prosecution, the accused “planned, instigated, ordered and/or aided and abetted persecutions on political and religious grounds against Bosnian Muslims and Croats” living in these municipalities.

Karadzic is also accused of planning and overseeing the 44-month siege of Sarajevo that left nearly 12,000 people dead, as well as the massacre of some 8,000 men and boys at Srebrenica in July 1995.

Nusret Sivac, survivor of the notorious prison camp Omarska near Prijedor, testified for the prosecution this week about the murders and abuse of non-Serbs he said he witnessed in 1992.

Sivac had been a police communications and encryption specialist until 1990, when he joined Bosnian television as a correspondent from Prijedor. He has already testified at several other trials at the Hague tribunal about ethnic cleansing in the Prijedor municipality at the beginning of the Bosnian 1992-95 war.

This week, Sivac told the court that Serb forces took over Prijedor in April 1992 and “conducted ethnic cleansing [of non-Serbs] in May”. The witness said he was arrested on July 10, 1992 and taken to the Prijedor police station by his former colleagues.

According to Sivac, members of a police unit then began beating the prisoners, while his former Serb colleagues were watching and laughing. The witness said he was soon transferred to the Omarska prison camp.

Describing what he saw and experienced in Omarska, Sivac said that “thousands of Muslims were held in hostile and inhumane conditions. They were beaten up, killed and tortured. They were not given enough food. Women were abused.

“The prisoners looked horrible, it was obvious they were subjected to great violence; they were starved and sick because of the conditions in the camp. There were people who couldn't even stand after they had been beaten.”

Sivac went on to say that in July 1992 several high-ranking officials from Karadzic’s ruling Serbian Democratic Party, SDS, from Banja Luka and Prijedor visited the Omarska prison camp.

“Radoslav Brdjanin, Radoslav Vukic, Predrag Radic, Stojan Zupljanin, Milomir Stakic, Milan Kovacevic, Simo Drljaca and others visited the camp. Prisoners were forced to sing Serb songs and raise three fingers, which is a Serb greeting, and exclaim ‘this is Serbia!’” the witness said.

The tribunal sentenced Brdjanin and Stakic to 32 and 40 years in prison respectively for crimes committed in the Prijedor area. The trial of Stojan Zupljanin is ongoing. Kovacevic died in the Hague detention unit in August 1998, shortly after his trial started. NATO forces killed Drljaca during an arrest operation in 1997, which was conducted in response to a warrant issued by the Hague tribunal.

Continuing his testimony, Sivac told the court that on, or around, July 20, 1992, twelve buses came into the Omarska camp, carrying Bosniaks from several villages in the Novo Brdo area, which he said was ethnically cleansed by Serb forces.

According to the indictment against Karadzic, around 150 villagers from this area were killed on July 20, 1992.

On their arrival in Omarska, Bosniak detainees were lined up against a wall and were subsequently abused and killed, according to Sivac.

“We in Omarska called this wall our Wailing Wall,” Sivac said, referring to the Jewish religious site in Jerusalem. He added that when the killings were over, two prisoners he knew were taken out and used a fire hose to clean up the blood and other evidence of abuse.

Sivac was released in August and was given permission to leave Prijedor in December 1992. However, he said that he first had to transfer the ownership of his property to the Serbian authorities in Prijedor

municipality.

During cross-examination of the witness, Karadzic, who represents himself in court, argued that Bosniaks were preparing for an attack on Prijedor in April 1992. The witness denied this allegation, reminding him that at that time the town was surrounded by the Yugoslav National Army.

Karadzic insisted that he had agreed with top officials from the leading Bosniak party, the Party for Democratic Action, SDA, to divide the Prijedor municipality between Serbs and Bosniaks.

The witness said that the SDS used the alleged talks about the division of Prijedor to buy more time to prepare for the attack on the municipality and that there was never any real intention on SDS's part to divide it, just to take it over completely.

The trial continues next week.

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