

Detainees Used as Human Shields

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Trial hears how prisoners were held captive by Serb Red Beret unit.

Witnesses in the Hague tribunal trial of Jovica Stanisic and Franko Simatovic told judges this week how they had been held captive in 1992 by a Serb unit known as the Red Berets.

Witnesses JF009 and JF008, who both testified under protective measures, described being detained at Percin's Disco in Doboj, Bosnia in July 1992 along with other male Muslim and Croat civilians.

Witness JF009 said that he was one of 50 detainees who were removed from the disco and used as "human shields".

"When we set off, one of [the soldiers] came and shot a man in the head," the witness told the judges on February 17. "He told us that, 'this is what will happen if you try to escape'."

Stanisic and Simatovic have been charged with participating in a joint criminal enterprise, with the objective of forcibly and permanently removing non-Serbs from large areas of Croatia and Bosnia through persecution, murder and deportation of the Croat, Bosnian Muslim and Bosnian Croat populations.

Stanisic served as the head of the Serbian State Security Service, DB, from 1991 to 1998, while Simatovic worked under the authority of Stanisic as the commander of the special operations unit of the DB.

According to the indictment, Stanisic and Simatovic established, organised and financed training centres for Serb forces, with the purpose of establishing military actions in Croatia and Bosnia.

The indictment states that Stanisic and Simatovic sent these forces to Croatia and Bosnia, where they committed crimes and took control of towns and villages in Serb-held areas in Croatia and Bosnia, forcing non-Serbs to leave the territories.

According to the indictment, Serb forces established a training centre at Mount Ozren in the municipality of Doboj, Bosnia, in 1992. On or about July 12, 1992, the indictment continues, special units of Serbia's DB used "non-Serb detainees as human shields and approximately 27 of these civilians were killed".

Witness JF009, whose face was obscured during the proceedings, said that in April 1992 Serb soldiers came to his village, where a majority of the residents were Muslim. The witness's village was not named due to protective measures.

According to the witness's 2001 statement to the Office of the Prosecution, OTP, the soldiers were not local. Based on their pronunciation and dialect, the witness reiterated this week, he believed they were from outside Bosnia but did not know the exact location of their origin.

The villagers were brought to the disco by Red Berets, a special operations unit of the DB, during the Muslim holiday of Bajram, the witness said.

Klaus Hoffman from the OTP read out the statement of Witness JF009, describing the events of July 12, 1992.

"One soldier burst inside [the disco] with a rifle. He had a camouflage uniform on and requested 50 men to come outside," the witness told the court, adding that the soldier belonged to the Red Berets unit.

According to the witness' statement, the detainees were subsequently used as "human shields".

Hoffman continued to read from the witness's statement, where he said that the men were told to remove their shirts and form a number of rows. Witness JF009 described how the soldier shot one of the detainees as an example to the other men.

"Are you able to describe the person that shot this detainee?" Hoffman asked.

"He was in a camouflage uniform. He also had a red beret on his head," the witness said.

The witness said that he did not know the man that was shot, but that he believed the victim was Croatian.

"What happened to his body?" Hoffman asked.

"We were ordered to throw his body into the river Bosna," the witness said.

Hoffman read from the witness's 2001 statement, in which he described Muslim men, women and children, all civilians, being transported out of the village of Doboje in July 1993.

"Did you and the other villagers leave of your own free will?" Hoffman asked.

"No," the witness told the judges. "Buses arrived to take us and we had to pay 50 deutschmarks for transportation."

"We had no choice at all," he added. "We all spent ten years or even longer living as refugees."

Judge Alphons Orie asked the witness who told the villagers to board the buses out of Doboje.

The witness said that the police arrived with the Red Cross from Doboj, and that the villagers were told to collect the bare necessities.

“Did anyone refuse to board the buses?” Judge Orié asked.

“No one would have remained there alive,” the witness said. “Even if you had been insane you would not have stayed there.”

Witness JF008 testified about the events in Doboj during the spring and summer of 1992. The witness had also been held in Percin’s Disco in Doboj.

The witness was taken away from his village with 20 others, according to his statement to the OTP, on April 15, 2009.

Witness JF008 was detained in two additional locations in July 1992, including a district prison in Doboj where he was held for 15 days, and in military storage halls alongside Bosniaks and Croats, according to the witness’s statement.

“Nobody ever told us why were being taken away,” the witness told the judges.

According to his statement, the witness was finally transferred to the disco in Doboj. Witness JF008 said there were between “312 and 320” detainees at the disco.

Witness JF008 said that he had no contact with the soldiers at the disco except on the day prisoners were used as “human shields” on July 12.

The witness said that he was not among the 50 men taken out of the disco, but that his brother was. Two men returned to the disco to describe what had happened to the other men who had not returned.

“How did you feel that day upon hearing this story?” the prosecution asked.

The witness, who initially believed his brother had died because he did not immediately return to the disco, told the judges, “I felt terrible.”

According to the witness’s statement, the Red Berets were feared by everyone, including the local police. He said that they had trained approximately 100 local soldiers and integrated them into their unit in 1992.

The witness said that after the Red Berets left in September, the locals who had been trained with the unit went back to their respective units. By 1993, people were banned from wearing red berets, he added.

Simatovic's defence attorney Mihajlo Bakrac asked the witness how 300 men could fit inside the disco.

"The area was so small," the witness said. "We all sat there with our legs folded and we were one on top of the other, like sardines in a can.... all the way to the door.

The trial continues next week.

Julia Hawes is an IWPR contributor.

Location: [Croatia](#)
[Bosnia and](#)
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