

Djordjevic Witness Denies Knowledge of Kosovo Expulsions

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Former border control officer tells tribunal he saw no mass movement of ethnic Albanians. A former border control officer in the Yugoslav army told judges at the Hague tribunal this week that he had no knowledge of a plan to expel ethnic Albanians from Kosovo during the conflict of the late 1990s.

Rade Cucak was testifying on behalf of former Serbian police chief Vlastimir Djordjevic, who is on trial for his alleged participation in a “systematic campaign” of terror and violence against Kosovo’s ethnic Albanian population.

Djordjevic is accused of engaging in a joint criminal enterprise that resulted in the deportation, murder, transfer and persecution of more than 800,000 ethnic Albanians between January 1 and June 20, 1999.

Cucak, a former border control officer in the Yugoslav army, said he monitored the Kosovo-Albania border during the spring of 1999, when the prosecution alleges that many ethnic Albanians were forced to leave Kosovo and often stripped of their identity cards in the process.

“Did you ever hear or see of a plan in the Yugoslav army that would involve expulsion of Albanians from Kosovo?” asked Aleksandar Popovic, one of Djordjevic’s lawyers.

“There was no such thing,” Cucak replied.

In his cross-examination, prosecutor Elliott Behar said that in March and April of 1999, there would have been “hundreds of thousands” of ethnic Albanians leaving Kosovo.

“Is this something you observed?” Behar asked.

Cucak replied that he had not.

“It is correct that I did read in the media that large number of individuals crossed the border, thus leaving the country,” Cucak continued. “Whether that [information] is correct or not, I cannot say.”

Behar countered that the number of people leaving Kosovo was not “really in dispute” and reminded the witness that in his original statement he said that over 800,000 people had crossed the border.

Cucak reiterated that the number had come from media reports produced after the NATO airstrikes had ceased in June 1999.

Presiding Judge Kevin Parker grilled the witness on this point, reading directly from his previous statement that “according to reports of the Serbian MUP (Ministry of Internal Affairs), during the war, 837, 136 people crossed over to Albania and Macedonia.

“I’m a bit astonished by your testimony. Can you explain this contradiction?”

“I found that number in one of the media reports and just copied it,” the witness responded. “I don’t know what media [organisation] it was.”

Cucak added that the media report cited the Serbian MUP but “whether this information is correct, I don’t know to this day”.

The witness was firm in his assertions that he did not see ethnic Albanians crossing the border, and Behar questioned him at length on this.

“We’ve heard extensive evidence of what was seen at the border crossings,” Behar said. “Freight trains jammed full of people, large numbers of Kosovo Albanians walking into No Man’s Land... what did you see or know about those events at the time?”

“I didn’t know and hadn’t heard anything at the time.”

He said that because his job was to monitor the entire border facing Albania, he was not present at specific border crossings.

Behar then asked the witness if he had heard of Serb forces taking away identification papers from ethnic Albanians.

“I’m hearing of it for the first time,” Cucak responded.

“This was not a practice you were made aware of by others, given your position?” Behar asked.

“No, and I was not interested in that,” the witness said.

“Would you agree that having one’s ID destroyed would make it virtually impossible for anyone to come back into Kosovo?” continued the prosecution.

“I don’t think hypothetical questions should be asked,” Cucak said. “I came to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, and that’s the oath I made.”

After the prosecution finished its cross-examination, Popovic asked the witness some additional questions.

“Do you know that every citizen of the FRY (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) was recorded in registers of birth?” Popovic asked.

“That is the case even now,” Cucak replied. “It’s a lasting document.”

“If you deprive someone of their ID card, do you erase their identity?” Popovic asked.

“No,” Cucak replied.

The trial continues next week.

Rachel Irwin is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

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