

Dutchbat Soldier Recalls Mistreatment of Srebrenica Detainees

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Former member of Dutch contingent retells experiences at time of Srebrenica massacre.

The international tribunal where former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic is on trial heard this week from a former United Nations peacekeeper in Srebrenica, who testified this week that he saw Bosniak detainees threatened at gunpoint and their identity documents burned.

Prosecution witness Johannes Rutten was deployed as platoon commander and intelligence officer in the Netherlands battalion of UN peacekeepers, known as DutchBat, in the Srebrenica enclave from January to July 1995.

Rutten, who has testified in two other trials at the Hague tribunal, was on the ground when the enclave, previously declared a UN "safe area", fell to Bosnian Serb forces on July 11, 1995. Thousands of Bosnian Muslim, or Bosniak, civilians fled to the UN compound in nearby Potocari.

Bosnian Serb forces then dispatched buses to the area, separated the Bosniak men and detained many of them in nearby buildings, including one the witness referred to as the "white house."

In the days that followed, some 8,000 Bosniak men and boys were transferred to various sites around Srebrenica and killed. It is considered the worst massacre on European soil since the Second World War.

As these events were unfolding, Rutten said he was able to gain access to the "white house".

"[The Bosnian Serb] military was standing in front of the white house and pointing with weapons at [the Bosniak detainees] that they had to get rid of their IDs," Rutten said this week. "Also youngsters, boys as young as 12 years old – they were held in the house. The [Bosnian Serb army] was clearly undertaking an operation that is not according to the Geneva Conventions."

"Did you see [Bosnian Serb soldiers] taking documents from the [detainees] and throwing them away?" Karadzic asked during the cross-examination.

Karadzic is representing himself in the courtroom.

"I saw with my very own eyes that the military pointed at civilians with weapons [to indicate] that they had to get rid of their personal identification and IDs. That is what I saw, Mr. Karadzic," Rutten responded.

"However, your description was that, by the time you arrived there, the IDs were on the pile [on the ground], right?" Karadzic asked.

"I was on several occasions inside and outside the white house," Rutten said. "This pile of IDs was growing every time I was around. The next day, the whole pile was burning. There was no reason to take these IDs from these civilians."

Karadzic countered that many of the men were wanted as war criminals and got rid of their own ID voluntarily.

Karadzic, the president of Bosnia's self declared Republika Srpska from 1992 to 1996, is accused of planning, instigating and/or failing to prevent or punish the Srebrenica massacre, as well as the 44-month siege of Sarajevo that left nearly 12,000 people dead.

The indictment – which lists 11 counts in total – alleges that he was responsible for crimes of genocide, persecution, extermination, murder and forcible transfer which "contributed to achieving the objective of the permanent removal of Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats from Bosnian Serb-claimed territory".

Karadzic was arrested in Belgrade in July 2008 after 13 years on the run.

The witness also spoke about the well-known video footage of Bosnian Serb soldiers handing out candy and bread to Bosniak civilians shortly after the fall of Srebrenica.

Rutten said he witnessed this event himself, and said the footage was in total contrast with the reality on the ground.

"Shortly after the camera stopped filming, the bread and candy stopped immediately," Rutten said, calling this a "propaganda moment" for the Bosnian Serbs.

Karadzic asked whether the people depicted in the video seemed “fearful.”

“These people hadn’t been fed for days so they were gladly accepting anything,” Rutten said. “Where I saw total fear was along the bus line where people were forced into buses, and I saw total fear in the white house.”

The witness also confirmed previous testimony that he found the bodies of nine dead males, aged between about 45 and 50, near the Potocari compound.

According to the prosecution’s summary of his evidence read aloud in court, the dead men had been shot, were “still warm” upon discovery, and they did not appear to have been moved. Rutten took photographs, but he and his colleagues had to flee when they heard gunshots, prosecuting lawyer Kimberly West stated.

Rutten informed his superiors about what he had seen and handed over the undeveloped film to the Dutch authorities when he returned to The Netherlands, but he was later informed that the photos had been “misdeveloped”, West continued.

Karadzic asked Rutten whether he saw the killing of the nine men himself.

“No, but shortly afterwards I came to the site where the people were killed,” Rutten responded.

“How did you know the people had been killed?” Karadzic asked.

“We could tell the people hadn’t been moved since they were shot,” Rutten said.

“Do you know that it’s necessary to conduct an investigation to reach a conclusion? Did you conduct an investigation?” Karadzic asked.

Rutten reiterated that there was no indication the bodies had been moved after they were shot.

“There was no time to carry out an on-site investigation because shortly after I made pictures, I was shot at by the [Bosnian Serb] army,” Rutten said.

“Did you at that time see with your own eyes the Serbs committing any war crime?” Karadzic asked towards the end of the cross examination.

Rutten said that in the white house, he saw a man who was hanging from a staircase by one arm.

“I asked the [Bosnian Serb] soldier to lower that man. He was in civilian clothes and there was no reason to keep him there. I saw very young people in custody in the white house, boys between 12 and 15 years old, all in civilian clothes,” Rutten said. “I don’t see why an army is keeping civilian personnel in custody and transporting them out of an enclave to an uncertain destination.”

After Rutten’s testimony, the defence filed a motion requesting judges to order the witness to hand over the notes he took at the time of the events, which he has so far refused to do.

The trial continues next week.

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