

Erdemovic Sheds Light on Srebrenica Killings

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Former Bosnian Serb soldier recounts Branjevo Military Farm executions.

The soldier who first told the world what happened in the days following the fall of Srebrenica testified again this week in the trial of seven high-ranking Bosnian Serb officials.

Former Bosnian Serb army infantryman Drazen Erdemovic pleaded guilty in 1996 to his role in the execution of thousands of Muslim men who were bussed to a farm from Srebrenica. He has since testified in several other trials and his testimony has been used as evidence in others.

This week he testified in the trial of Ljubisa Beara, Ljubomir Borovcanin, Vujadin Popovic, Drago Nikolic, Vinko Pandurevic, Radivoje Miletic and Milan Gvero.

They all face charges of expelling the Muslim population of Srebrenica and Zepa and murdering all able-bodied men captured from Srebrenica. Beara, Borovcanin, Popovic, Nikolic and Pandurevic are accused of genocide and war crimes, while Miletic and Gvero are indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Erdemovic, who testified under protective measures, said in court that on the morning of July 11, 1995, his unit, under the command of Milorad Pelemisa, was the first to enter Srebrenica.

Erdemovic said Pelemisa warned the unit they should expect strong resistance near the mosque, and to send all civilians to the stadium in the centre of town.

According to the witness, they encountered no resistance along the way, just “elderly civilians who had problems walking”.

At one point, Erdemovic said an able-bodied man surrendered, saying he wasn't in the army and had nothing against the Serbs. The witness testified he then heard Pelemisa order that the man be killed.

The following day, Erdemovic and his unit left Srebrenica.

Several days later, on July 16, Erdemovic and seven other men from his unit were ordered to head toward Zvornik for an assignment.

On the way, his truck stopped at a compound where a lieutenant colonel and two military police men got in another military vehicle and led the group to the Branjevo Military Farm. The indictment alleges 1,200 men were executed at the farm and a nearby school.

Erdemovic described the lieutenant colonel as “tall, corpulent with greyish hair and strong features”.

He said he knew the two men with the lieutenant colonel were military police because he saw the insignia on their uniforms. He assumed they were from the Drina Corps because that unit was headquartered in Zvornik.

According to the witness, once the vehicles arrived at the farm, the lieutenant colonel was present when Erdemovic's group was told buses would be arriving carrying people from Srebrenica who were to be killed.

After the buses began arriving, Erdemovic testified the lieutenant colonel left the farm and he was given a rifle. The prisoners were brought from the buses, "blindfolded and their hands were tied behind their backs".

Erdemovic said he and the other soldiers were ordered to shoot the prisoners in the back. The execution lasted for several hours and he estimated about 1,000 men were killed that day.

Towards the end of the killing, Erdemovic testified the lieutenant colonel returned and said there were 500 prisoners in Pilica who were trying to escape from the cultural centre where they were being held. He said the soldiers needed to go to Pilica and execute those prisoners.

The indictment alleges those 500 men were executed at the cultural centre.

Erdemovic said he and several other men refused. They were told to go to a coffee shop, which was directly across the street from the cultural centre. Erdemovic said he saw bodies on the road and could hear "shots and explosions coming from the hall".

After that, Erdemovic said he returned to his base.

The defence will continue its cross-examination of Erdemovic next week.

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