

Ex-Bosnian Serb Army Soldier Speaks of Non-Serb Expulsions

Author: [Rachel Irwin](#)

Former soldier tells Karadzic trial he saw Bosnian Serb troops forcing Croats and Muslims to leave Sarajevo suburb.

Radovan Karadzic's forces expelled non-Serb civilians from a Sarajevo neighbourhood and looted their property, a former Bosnian Serb army soldier told the Hague tribunal this week.

"I saw the expulsions with my very own eyes," said the prosecution witness, who was not named and gave evidence with face and voice distortion. A former member of the Sarajevo Romanija Corps of the Bosnian Serb army, he said he was present in the Grbavica area as Bosnian Serb forces took control in mid-May 1992.

"People were in columns with plastic bags ... after their property had been looted down to the last needle," he said.

Karadzic, who continues to represent himself, expressed scepticism of the witness's account.

"If you did see a column moving, how do you know this was not something done according to an agreement? How can you claim the line of people was being expelled?" asked Karadzic during the cross-examination.

"I could see from their expressions that they were being forcibly expelled," the witness answered. "If someone is kicking somebody in the backside and hitting them with a rifle butt ... [they aren't leaving voluntarily]."

"Who kicked whom?" Karadzic asked.

"Serbian soldiers were kicking civilians of Croat and Muslim ethnicity," the witness answered.

"I don't accept that at all," Karadzic retorted. He said that after the Bosnian Serb army took over the area, "it was not possible...to expel anyone".

"Even a bird could not [leave]," the accused maintained.

Prosecutors allege that Karadzic, the president of Bosnia's self-declared Republika Srpska from 1992 to 1996, planned and oversaw the 44-month siege of Sarajevo that left nearly 12,000 people dead. Karadzic's army is accused of deliberately sniping and shelling the city's civilian population in order to "spread terror" among them.

The indictment - which lists 11 counts in total - alleges that Karadzic 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". He was arrested in Belgrade in July 2008 after 13 years on the run.

Giving testimony this week, the witness said that "there was no order to loot" from the Bosnian Serb army.

"Everybody looted as they wished," the witness said. "There were also honest soldiers who did not do that. There were soldiers from my unit who did not steal."

However, he added that while there wasn't an order that instructed soldiers to loot, he "had the sense that expulsions were carried out pursuant to orders".

"Did you report the perpetrators?" Karadzic asked.

"I didn't," the witness responded. "I tried once to protect a Muslim civilian - I went to the military police and said what [had] happened. He waved his hand [at me]."

Earlier, prosecuting lawyer Hildegard Uertz-Retzlaff asked the witness about the effects of Karadzic's pre-war political speeches and media interviews.

In one statement, Karadzic told a Serbian newspaper that "the Serbs will never find peace until they have achieved the aspiration of living in one state", Uertz-Retzlaff read out.

She also read aloud from a speech where Karadzic stated that "Serbs are the only people in the world who were persecuted and killed because they exist and that's why we won't let them separate us".

The witness said that he was very familiar with this type of rhetoric.

“At the time, Mr Karadzic was a charismatic person among the Serb people,” the witness said. “People trusted him and thought [a single state] was an idea that was achievable.

“His overall policy as the top man of [the Serbian Democratic Party] led in that direction, namely to prove to both peoples that they can no longer live together. However, he is not competent at all to decide who [can] live with whom.”

The witness said these statements caused Bosniaks and Croats to feel “unsafe and uncertain”.

During the cross-examination, Karadzic challenged the witness’s observations.

“Can you understand that a million and half Serbs felt bad about being separated [from] Yugoslavia and living in [then Bosnian president Alija Izetbegovic’s] Bosnia?” Karadzic asked. “That is to say, the same feelings you recognise among Muslims and Croats, do you accept that those same kinds of fears and anxieties were also felt by Serbs?”

“At that time no one said Bosnia Hercegovina would be a unitary state,” the witness responded. “These are your dark expectations. This is not Izetbegovic’s Bosnia Hercegovina. He is not the owner and cannot behave like the owner of those three peoples. In life there are problems, and problems are resolved in life.”

This witness is the only one to have testified during the trial’s month long hiatus, granted by judges in early November to give Karadzic time to review several thousand pages of recently disclosed material. The proceedings will officially resume on December 7.

Rachel Irwin is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

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