

Ex-Envoy Claims Belgrade Knew of Bosnia Crimes

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He says Yugoslav authorities “were informed on the mass killing and crimes against civilians” in Bosnia and were actively involved.

The Belgrade government was well aware from diplomatic telegrams of crimes committed by Bosnian Serbs during the 1992-95 war, a former Bosnian ambassador at the United Nations testified at the Hague tribunal this week.

Former ambassador Muhamed Sacirbegovic was testifying in the case against former Yugoslav army, VJ, general Momcilo Perisic.

The testimony aims to back the prosecution’s assertion that the representatives of the rump Yugoslavia, including former VJ chief of staff Perisic, not only knew of the crimes committed by the Bosnian Serb army and paramilitaries in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995, but that Belgrade assisted those crimes by providing “armament, personnel, military equipment and services to Bosnian Serbs”.

In video link testimony from the United States, Sacirbegovic stressed that Belgrade was informed through its diplomatic representatives at the United Nations about the crimes in Bosnia.

“From 1992 to 1995, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, FRY, was never without its representatives at the UN,” he said. “I responsibly declare that they were informed on the mass killing and crimes against civilians in Bosnia-Herzegovina.”

Perisic is the most senior VJ officer to be charged with war crimes in Bosnia and Croatia, including aiding and abetting the 43-month siege of Sarajevo, the shelling of the Croatian capital Zagreb and the massacre of some 8,000 Bosnian Muslim males after the fall of Srebrenica to the Bosnian Serb army in July 1995.

The indictment says that Perisic provided financial, material, logistical and personnel support to Serb forces operating in Bosnia and Croatia between 1991 and 1995, thus contributing to genocide in Sarajevo and Srebrenica.

Sacirbegovic detailed how Bosnian officials compiled information on the crimes from various sources: from UN ground forces, official notes directed to the Security Council, discussions with Bosnian colleagues or media which reported widely on civilian suffering.

“We were very insistent and had a systematic approach to reporting on what was being done by Bosnian Serb forces on the ground,” said Sacirbegovic. “I even used to daily direct various diplomatic notes which would be delivered through carrier and, after going through protocol, would be available to everyone as public documents. There were at least 200 in number every year.

“I personally felt morally responsible to record every victim I knew of, in order to prove to the international community that there was a grave violation of international humanitarian law going on in Bosnia [and] Herzegovina. I thought then that this was genocide, and I still believe that it was genocide.”

Sacirbegovic added that the contents of these letters and official notes described the "grave humanitarian situation on the ground, the problems of civilians and refugees, the interrupted supply of medicine and food, the provision of military equipment from FRY and violations of the control of the borders of Bosnia [and] Hercegovina".

He said he was sure "that FRY representatives were reading these letters".

"I know for sure, as we often received answers to them," he said, adding that the letters often led to discussions with FRY representatives.

He added that wartime Bosnian foreign minister Haris Silajdzic also sent regular notes to the UN where he informed them of "atrocious crimes in the Drina river valley in eastern Bosnia which had been witnessed by refugees coming to Sarajevo".

Sacirbegovic said that there was no doubt in his mind that Yugoslav army troops were "directly involved in the conflict in Bosnia and Hercegovina", adding that they did it in a variety of ways, from directing their "military and paramilitary forces and killing the civilian population", but also in the "logistic support and weapons and other regular provisions to Bosnian Serbs".

"The government of Bosnia [and] Hercegovina believed that the Yugoslav People's Army, JNA, would be a neutral force, however, it became clear soon enough that JNA was the one taking action and causing evil to the populace," he said. The JNA was later transformed into the VJ.

Sacirbegovic's testimony was often interrupted by objections from the defence lawyer Gregor Guy-Smith who said the witness was "not an expert, but should testify about facts".

The prosecution also submitted into evidence a set of UN Security Council resolutions and reports by the Special Reporter for Human Rights in the Former Yugoslavia, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, including UN Resolution 827 on the Forming of the Hague Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, and UN Resolution 819 of April 16, 1993.

Sacirbegovic said that with Resolution 819, "the Security Council demanded that the FRY immediately cease providing armament and military equipment". The resolution was adopted "after the International Court of Justice issued provisional measures that the FRY immediately undertake measures to prevent the crime of genocide".

The witness said that "the Mazowiecki reports on the horrible evil that happened to civilians in Bosnia [and] Hercegovina were broad and detailed, much broader from the ones in the media, and available to all".

"He reported on all segments of crimes from murder, rape, terror, forced deportation, limitation of freedom of movement and right to medication, food and water, destruction of religious and cultural monuments and the punishment and terrorisation of civilian populations," Sacirbegovic said.

"These reports were available to everyone, to all [UN] member states including the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia."

He said he believed Belgrade "read both the reports and the Security Council resolutions".

"I claim this because I know that FRY representatives reacted to them, first orally and then in writing", he said.

Perisic's trial started on October 2, 2008. He surrendered to the Hague tribunal in March 2005, pleading not guilty to charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The trial continues next week.

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