

JNA Officer Allegedly Kept Vukovar Observers at Bay

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Yugoslav army major said to have held up international observers as hospital wounded were taken off to be executed.

One of the Yugoslav army officers on trial for the Vukovar massacre prevented international observers reaching the town's hospital on the day wounded and sick Croats were taken for execution, a prosecution witness testified this week.

Danish military doctor Jan Alan Shou, a member of the European Monitoring Mission, ECMM, described how he and his colleagues, together with members of the International red Cross, ICRC, had attempted to reach the hospital on the morning of November 20, 1991, but were stopped on a bridge close to the town by members of the Yugoslav People's Army, JNA.

The international observers had come to Vukovar to oversee the evacuation of everyone in the hospital as part of an agreement reached between the Croatian government and the JNA in Zagreb two days earlier.

Shou said the JNA major Veselin Slivancanin - accused with two other officers of overseeing the killing of 264 Croats at Ovcara farm after Vukovar fell into Yugoslav army hands - told the ECMM party they could not proceed because of the danger of snipers.

The JNA held the international observers for two hours, which, according to the indictment against Slivancanin and fellow accused Mile Mrksic and Miroslav Radic, was the time it took to remove from the hospital scores of wounded and sick Croats, most of whom were later executed by Serbian forces at Ovcara farm on the outskirts of the town.

Once the ECMM team was finally allowed to proceed, Shou said they found only women, children and a few men in the hospital. These remaining patients, he went on, were being harassed by drunken Serbian paramilitaries.

When Shou asked Sljivancanin what happened to the men, the JNA officer replied that they had been arrested as "criminals" and taken to a prison.

The defence, meanwhile, claimed that the reason the international observers were held up on the bridge was because one of them, ICRC representative, Nicholas Borsinger, had an argument with Sljivancanin. They asserted that Borsinger's personality was such that he "got into conflict with everybody" - although Serbian TV footage of the bridge incident clearly shows Sljivancanin yelling at the ICRC representative.

The defence also tried to shift responsibility for the bridge delay onto the most senior JNA officer in the Vukovar area, Colonel Nebojsa Pavkovic, claiming that he had ordered Yugoslav troops to stop the international observers. Pavkovic has been indicted at the tribunal in relation to events in Kosovo in 1999.

Shou, however, insisted that it was Sljivancanin who stopped him and his colleagues.

A second prosecution witness this week, the head of the hospital, Vesna Bosanac, provided a list of people who had been treated there during the siege of the town and were later executed at Ovcara. The evidence was an attempt to disprove defence claims that the victims were Croatian soldiers, not patients.

So far 192 bodies from the Ovcara mass grave have been identified, 97 of whom were receiving medical treatment at the hospital, according to Bosanac's list.

A third prosecution witness this week, the chief surgeon at the hospital, Juraj Njavro, confirmed a statement he had given earlier that Sljivancanin took charge of the hospital evacuation. According to Njavro, the accused had said that "he is in command of hospital, this is his land and his orders are going to be followed".

At the end of week, a fourth prosecution witness, former Serbian journalist Slavoljub Kacarevic, who interviewed Radic and Sljivancanin after the fall of Vukovar, said Radic had confirmed that the JNA commanded Serbian paramilitaries, which the defence claims were responsible for the Ovcara massacre.

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