

Karadzic Challenges Forensic Expert on Srebrenica

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Defendant argues that International Commission on Missing Persons is a biased institution.

Former Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadzic this week challenged the findings of a forensic expert whose organisation was tasked with counting and identifying human remains recovered from mass graves after the 1995 Srebrenica massacre.

Prosecution witness Thomas Parsons is currently the director of forensic sciences at the International Commission on Missing Persons, ICMP, and previously worked for the United States army in its DNA identification laboratory. He has testified in two other Srebrenica-related trials at the Hague tribunal.

The ICMP, headquartered in the Bosnian capital Sarajevo, was established to support the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the conflict in Bosnia and Hercegovina in 1996. It is currently the biggest forensic human identification programme in the world, the witness said.

ICMP's list of victims found in and around Srebrenica had been entered into evidence, but had not been made public because some of the victims' families had not yet been informed about the identification of their relatives, the prosecution told the court.

Karadzic's legal advisor Peter Robinson protested against the this list still being subject to confidentiality, and said this should be lifted so that the ICMP's findings could be in the public domain.

"Once the identity of these persons is made public, than someone who is now alive and well and living in Salt Lake City could call in and say that he is alive, rather than being considered a victim", Robinson told judges.

Despite Srebrenica's protected status as a demilitarised United Nations "safe area", Bosnian Serb forces began shelling the town in early July 1995, officially capturing it on July 11. In the days that followed, some 8,000 Bosniak men and boys were killed at various sites around Srebrenica. The massacre has been classified as genocide by both the Hague tribunal and the International Court of Justice.

Karadzic, who was Bosnian Serb president from 1992 to 1996, is charged with individual and superior responsibility for Srebrenica, as well as for 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. Witness testimony in this trial got under way in April 2010, and the accused is representing himself in the courtroom.

In his testimony, Parsons said that "apart from the 6,606 victims from Srebrenica which were identified, the post-mortem remains were found for 166 persons for which an identification has not yet been possible."

He said the lack of identification for this group was due to a lack of survivors "whose DNA could be used as comparable material with that of the victims".

Parsons told the chamber that "identification is a constant process, and therefore it was nothing strange that this number was increased from the previous 6,530" - the figure he used in an earlier report prepared for the prosecution.

In his cross-examination, Karadzic claimed that the ICMP was an "American-funded and controlled institution" and therefore biased. He has long expressed his intention of challenging any conclusions made by Parsons and the ICMP, and that he plans to "hire his own experts".

In response to the defendant's claim that the ICMP was biased, the witness said that there were "more than 20 governments financing the work of the commission" and that it had an independent board.

Karadzic also said that "the newest findings of the Muslim side... prove that the ICMP was wrong".

"Look at what senior representatives of the Muslims have said, such as Amor Masovic [director of the Bosnian Missing Persons institute] and Mirsad Tokaca [director of the Investigation-Documentation Centre]. They said that there were 500 people who were still alive on those lists related to Srebrenica," the accused

said.

The witness said he had no knowledge of “what lists the accused was referring to”, but stated that these 500 people could “in no case be on any list of those identified by the ICMP using DNA comparison”.

Karadzic said, however, that he “knew that the Muslim side recently announced that several hundred people were proclaimed dead due to the fact that their amputated body parts, which remained after surgery, somehow wandered into the DNA laboratories”.

Parsons answered by saying that he had never heard of such a claim and that “there was very little chance that such a claim could be correct”.

“[The ICMP] doesn’t work in a world of ‘sides’, be they Muslim or otherwise, [but is] trying to identify people gone missing during the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, regardless of national, religious or other identity,” the witness said.

The trial continues next week.

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