

Karadzic Trial Witness Rails at Prosecution

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Former Bosnian Serb minister claims prosecutors threatened to incarcerate him if did not testify for them.

A former minister in Radovan Karadzic's government took the stand last week at the Hague tribunal and implored judges not to make him testify for the prosecution.

Momcilo Mandic, who served as deputy interior minister, and then minister of justice, in Bosnia's self-declared Republika Srpska during 1992, told judges that having to testify for the prosecution was "not commensurate with a man's dignity".

In a lengthy speech, 56-year-old Mandic said that he was threatened by prosecutors with "incarceration" if he didn't testify. In addition, he said that in 2003 he was suspected of harbouring Karadzic, who was still a fugitive at the time, and as a result he was imprisoned in Belgrade and questioned by tribunal investigators.

Mandic, a lawyer by training, later stood trial in Sarajevo for the persecution and mistreatment of non-Serb civilians during the war. Mandic was acquitted of those charges in 2007, a decision that was upheld on appeal in April of this year. He also served time in prison for crimes related to his business dealings.

"Now I'm supposed to come here and be a prosecution witness," said Mandic. "I request that the trial chamber allow me to be a court's witness."

Judges granted that request, after prosecuting lawyer Alan Tieger said that either way, the witness would be giving evidence to the court.

"I believe in this instance we're talking about a distinction without a difference," said Tieger. "The procedural approach would remain the same. The point Mr Mandic wished to make has been made."

Mandic previously testified in the trial of Momcilo Krajisnik, former president of the Bosnian Serb assembly who was convicted of crimes against humanity and sentenced by the tribunal to 20 years in prison. Mandic also testified in the trial of Bosnian Serb police officials Mico Stanisic and Stojan Zupljanin, and his prior testimony was the subject of several questions during the prosecution's examination.

For example, Tieger quoted Mandic as saying in the Stanisic and Zupljanin trial that when it came to appointing Serbs to high-level positions in the Bosnian government and police force prior to the outbreak of war, Karadzic "liked to meddle. He always wanted to have a finger in the pie".

Mandic, however, seemed not to remember that statement and said it "might" have been taken out of context. When Tieger pressed the issue, Mandic said that Karadzic "never interfered and never asked for individuals to be given individual posts".

At the point, Karadzic interjected that the phrase "finger in the pie" is an "English idiom and probably not a good translation of what the witness said".

Karadzic, the president of Republika Srpska from 1992 to 1996, is accused of planning and overseeing the massacre of some 8,000 Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) men and boys at Srebrenica in 1995, as well as 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.

During Mandic's testimony, Tieger played several phone intercepts between various members of the Bosnian Serb government, and also showed video clips from a rally where Karadzic, Krajisnik and other officials spoke.

Speaking to what appeared to be a large, cheering crowd, Karadzic waves to them and says that it has been "six hundred years since we lost the Serbian state".

"Our enemy has brought us to the most beautiful and sacred goal of ours," he proclaims in the clip.

Appearing at the podium, Krajisnik says that "all territory in the Republika Srpska and [Bosnian] Krajina will be Serbia".

The video also showed Bosnian Serb officials Vojo Kupresanin and Radoslav Brdanin speaking to the crowd. Brdanin was sentenced by the tribunal to 30 years in prison for his role in the persecution, torture and deportation of non-Serb civilians.

Brdanin talks about "leftist forces offering coexistence" while Kupresanin says that the "land has been ours forever".

Tieger put it to the witness that Brdanin and Kupresanin were not "two isolated extremists" but were "embraced and connected to Karadzic and the rest of the leadership".

"That's not my opinion," responded Mandic.

"You weren't aware that Mr Karadzic and Mr Krajisnik, as reflected here, supported and praised the words of Brdanin and Kupresanin?" asked Tieger.

Mandic said the excerpts were taken out of the context of the entire speeches and that he was seeing the footage for the first time.

"I don't want to analyse sentiments expressed in public places," he said. "[They] are trying to win over the masses and telling them what they want to hear. I can't confirm your view that they supported Kupresanin and Brdanin, or that they didn't."

Mandic added that as far as he knew, "Krajisnik and Karadzic did not advocate for a Serbian state. What they said at rallies were for the benefit of the Serbian people".

Earlier, Tieger quoted Kupresanin as saying in an assembly session that Muslims and Croats "are our natural enemies".

Mandic said he never heard those statements himself and couldn't speak to them. However, he did say that after these assembly sessions the Bosnian Serbs "would go and have coffee with those they had spoken out against".

"That did happen," he continued. "Were they trying to ingratiate themselves with people [in the leadership] this way? That I don't know. It's false nationalism to me [and] aimed at the public, as it were. That was how I experienced it."

After Tieger asked a series of questions about inflammatory statements allegedly made by other Bosnian Serb officials, Karadzic interjected and asked judges, "Who is on trial here?"

"Everyone was free to say what they liked! Mr Tieger can show any number of documents where people showed extreme views," he exclaimed.

Prior to Mandic's testimony - which continues this week - a protected witness testified for the prosecution. No information was given about his identity or role, but he testified in French and spoke about being in Sarajevo during the war. This witness was issued the pseudonym 185 and his image was digitally distorted for members of the public.

He told prosecutors that the Bosnian Serb sniping and shelling campaign was meant to "terrorise" the civilian population.

"[The Bosnian Serb army] wanted the civilian population to give up from a psychological point of view .and they wanted the [Bosnian government army] to give up," the witness said.

However, during the cross-examination, the witness also appeared to confirm some of Karadzic's claims.

"Was it in the interest of Muslim side to dramatise situation in Sarajevo, especially in a ceasefire when media attention was lower?" asked Karadzic.

"I do believe that in order to make up for their inferiority in military terms, the Bosnian government would carry out a kind of media war," the witness said.

"For that purpose, they staged dramatic incidents around city," contended Karadzic.

"That's what I was told, and I believe I witnessed such incidents," the witness responded.

"Do you allow for the possibility that Muslims from time to time bombed their own territory, own people and own units?" Karadzic asked a few minutes later.

"Indeed, on a few occasions we noticed that there were snipers firing within the city, and perhaps also mortar fire," the witness answered.

Karadzic also asked the witness about a March 1993 ceasefire, and produced a document where Bosnian government army General Sefer Halilovic apparently stated that the ceasefire was for "propaganda purposes" and should be considered "null and void".

"Did you know about this duplicity, this double play, where they accept a ceasefire and then the next day send out secret documents telling people to disregard it?" Karadzic asked.

"All parties at hand were playing double play," said the witness. "This double play from Muslims doesn't surprise me but I experienced from other parties as well."

The trial continues this week.

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