

## **KLA Trial Hears of "Abductions"**

**Author:** [Michael Farquhar](#)

Prosecution witnesses speak of the last time they saw men allegedly killed by Kosovar Albanian accused.

The trial of three former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army has heard from a wife and a colleague of two men who disappeared in Kosovo in 1998 and who are alleged to have died at a prison camp run by the accused.

In court this week, a Kosovar Serb mother of two told how she searched frantically for her husband after he went missing while driving back to Kosovo from Belgrade in June 1998. She said she later heard from friends that he had been kidnapped by "terrorists" and killed.

Later in the week, a Russian TV journalist testified about the disappearance of his Albanian interpreter, who was detained by armed Albanian men in Kosovo together with the rest of the Russian crew in July of the same year. All but the interpreter were released – and they never saw him again, he said.

Prosecutors say the two missing men were among more than twenty people abducted by the KLA in 1998 and murdered in and around a prison camp in Lapusnik run by the three accused, Fatmir Limaj, Isak Musliu and Haradin Bala. The facility allegedly dealt with ethnic Serbs and suspected Albanian collaborators.

Ljiljana Mitrovic told the court that on June 24, 1998, her husband Slobodan, known as Boban, was driving his sick cousin Miodrag Krstic from a Belgrade hospital back to their home in the suburbs of Suva Reka in Kosovo. Also in the car was Miodrag's brother, Milovan.

In the evening, Ljiljana, who had very recently taken her children to live in her mother's house in Serbia to escape mounting tensions in the province, called home to find that they had not arrived.

As time passed and no news came, Ljiljana contacted some friends in the police, who confirmed that the car carrying her husband and his cousins had entered Kosovo. Then, she said, she set off for Suva Reka to try to find out what had happened to them.

Back in Kosovo, an Albanian friend told her that the three men had been abducted by "terrorists" and had been driven off in the direction of Malisevo, a town near Lapusnik. She said a number of other people she spoke to confirmed the kidnap story.

One friend gave her a more detailed account that he had heard from an acquaintance in the local police. The policeman said a man had visited him and told him that Boban and his cousins had been kidnapped and that he had been present when they were killed by Albanians.

"And if it was of any consolation for me," said Ljiljana, recounting the story, "he said that [my husband] had sent me his love, and that Boban had fallen after being shot with only one bullet in the forehead."

At this point the witness bowed her head, but turned down prosecutor Steven Cayley's offer of a break.

Ljiljana told the court that in November that year she received a series of telephone calls from a man with a Macedonian accent who claimed to have seen her husband recently. He declined to give his name but told her to travel to Skopje so he could give her an envelope containing demands for Boban's release.

The man was vague about Boban's whereabouts, saying that he was "on the other side of the border" but not necessarily in Macedonia. And when Ljiljana asked to speak to her husband on the phone, the caller said that this did not depend on him, but on "the people holding" Boban.

When she asked the man to prove his claims by getting from Boban some information that only she and her husband would know, the man stopped calling her.

Ljiljana told the court that, as a member of a number of organisations for the families of those who went missing in Kosovo during the troubles, she had come into contact with many other people who received similar phone calls after their loved ones disappeared. Some, she said, had lost money in attempts to pay ransoms to the anonymous callers.

Under cross-examination by defence lawyers, Ljiljana acknowledged that there were gangsters operating in the Kosovo countryside at the time, some of whom presented themselves as part of the liberation struggle.

And she spoke about the only other occurrence that had given her any real reason to think her husband was alive. Also in November, a farmer said he had seen Miodrag Krstic in a passing truck full of refugees. But the story was never confirmed by anyone else, she said.

When Cayley later asked the witness for her thoughts on the current whereabouts of her husband, she expressed resignation.

"I would like to be proven wrong and be given a chance to apologise to everyone," she told the court. "But I do believe he was killed."

She also said she believes her husband was already dead by the time she began receiving the anonymous telephone calls.

Later in the week, the court heard from Oleg Safiulin, a reporter for Russian state television.

Safiulin said he arrived in Kosovo in July 1998, along with a cameraman and sound engineer, to complete a short stint covering the conflict there. Colleagues put them in touch with an ethnic Albanian, Shaban Hoti, who was a university lecturer specialising in Russian language and literature and who would act as their interpreter.

On July 20, the group set out in the direction of KLA-held territory around Lopusnik to try to gather footage. But their Belgrade-registered car was turned back at a checkpoint manned by armed Albanian men just outside the village.

Disappointed, the team decided to stop about a kilometre away and film a bullet-riddled bus by the side of the road. Safiulin said they had almost finished gathering their footage when a group of Albanian soldiers came running towards them from the direction of Lopusnik and forced them to return to the checkpoint.

Their equipment, documents and money were confiscated and they were held for around two hours before being driven to a house, where they were blindfolded and forced to wait another two to three hours. In the process, the Russians were separated from their interpreter.

They next saw him, Safiulin said, when their blindfolds were removed for interrogation. A bloodied and obviously beaten Hoti, "shaking with fear", was forced to translate the questioning before being led away again.

The KLA soldiers told the Russians that Hoti was working for the Serbian police, that they too were obviously Serbian spies and that they would have to be executed. They were then left in the house to await their fate.

But the apparently senior soldier who had interrogated them returned at dusk with food and water and told them, "It looks like nothing bad is going to happen to you now."

They were eventually released with their equipment and belongings, and allowed to drive themselves back to the nearest Serb checkpoint and on to Pristina. The following day, Safiulin called Hoti's daughter to tell her that her father had been taken captive.

Prosecutors allege that Hoti was among ten men who survived internment at the Lapusnik camp but were massacred by Bala and others on July 26 in nearby mountains, after the KLA was forced to abandon the facility in the face of a Serb offensive.

Under cross-examination by defence lawyers, Safiulin acknowledged that a Serb friend of Hoti's later told him that their interpreter had in fact cooperated with the Serb police.

Defence lawyers also suggested that the television crew's decision to film near the checkpoint after they had been turned away was potentially provocative and also that many in Kosovo at the time would have viewed Russians as allies of the Serbs.

Prosecutors this week also called a Norwegian policeman Kaare Birkeland who worked for a UN team investigating war crimes in Kosovo following the 1999 NATO airstrikes and said he had interviewed Musliu at the time.

The police witness came under sustained attack from defence lawyers who criticised him for not being able to produce his original notes from the interviews, which were apparently destroyed.

The prosecution is expected to call its next witness on December 13.

Michael Farquhar is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

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