

## **Knin "Randomly Targeted" in Operation Storm**

**Author:** [Goran Jungvirth](#)

Witness testimony suggests exodus from Krajina was triggered by bombardment, and not ordered by Serb authorities.

A former United Nations logistics officer told the trial of three generals that the shelling of Knin during a 1995 operation to recapture Serb-held areas of Croatia was designed not to hit military targets but to frighten civilians into fleeing.

"It was deliberate, harassing fire," said Josef Lorenzo Claude Belrose, a Canadian retired colonel.

Belrose, who was in charge of building UN control points in the area at the time of the Croatian army's Operation Storm, admitted he was not an artillery expert, but said the attack involved "random shelling during random time periods". This ties in with evidence given by other UN personnel.

Generals Ante Gotovina, Ivan Cermak and Mladen Markac are accused of war crimes committed against Serbs by troops under their command during and after Operation Storm, which recaptured the Krajina region held by Serb rebels since 1991.

It is estimated that some 200,000 Serbs left the region around the time of the offensive.

According to the indictment, the generals took part in a "joint criminal enterprise" designed to drive the Serb population from Croatia. It says that at least 30 people were killed in Knin and at least 150 across Krajina as a whole between August and November 1995.

Gotovina was commander of Operation Storm, Markac was in charge of special police units, and Cermak became military commissar in Knin after the town was captured.

Belrose described how he watched the shelling from a balcony at the UN headquarters.

"If there were military targets seen as a threat to Croatian forces, shelling would be more intensive and directed to concrete targets. Cannon-fire was not directed to one place, but projectiles were falling randomly over the whole town in random intervals," he told the court.

The witness said that the few military targets in Knin included two barracks and a building that served as command centre for Serb forces. But he did not think the artillery fire was focused on them.

On August 4, 1995, while delivering supplies to Knin hospital, the witness said he saw substantial destruction in the town and a few corpses, some in uniform and some in civilian clothing.

In a statement he gave to prosecution investigators, Belrose said that by August 6, Croatian forces were already cleaning up ruins and repairing civilian buildings on Knin's main street. He claimed that in doing

so, they wanted to make international observers think the situation was better than it actually was.

During cross-examination, Belrose could not tell the defence whether the local Serb military made use of the civilian targets hit by Croatian artillery.

The defence is trying to prove that UN observers were unaware of all the Serb military positions because their movements were restricted and their information came from the rebels themselves.

Belrose also described how he saw signs of looting and the burning of houses in nearby villages when he was removing UN observation points. He said UN representatives were unable to enter the villages because Croatian special police stopped them, telling them operations were under way and it was not safe.

During cross-examination, the witness said he could not remember the names of the villages or the UN colleagues who were with him.

Gotovina's defence presented a report by the UN secretary-general's representative, Yasushi Akashi, and the testimonies of previous prosecution witnesses who said there was not significant damage to civilian facilities in Knin.

For example, Peter Galbraith, a former United States ambassador to Zagreb, said in testimony at the end of June that Knin was not randomly targeted during the first days of Operation Storm. The damage from shelling was not large-scale and the city was left largely undamaged, Galbraith said, adding that this information came from embassy staff who - unlike UN personnel - were allowed to move around Knin.

Later this week, Jovan Dopudj, a former member of the municipal assembly in the town of Obrovac, testified how the Serb population fled on the first day of the Croatian attack. He said people became frightened after artillery started to hit civilian buildings.

The prosecution was trying to support its claim that the Serb exodus was spontaneous and was prompted by random shelling. The defence, on the other hand, says the Serbs left Croatia under a pre-arranged evacuation plan drawn up by the rebel authorities.

While Dopudj was in the witness stand, Gotovina's defence argued that initial preparations for evacuation were ready as early as June 1995. The defence sought to support this argument with a statement issued by Dragomir Vukcevic, the former mayor of Obrovac, in which he told investigators that trial evacuation exercises took place several times prior to the Croatian attack.

Dopudj did not agree that this was the case. "This was the mayor's wish to give himself some more credit," he said.

The defence also presented a document from July 1995 in which the chief of the Obrovac civil defence asked for materials to build rafts to be delivered for use in an evacuation. However, Dopudj again denied there was an organised plan.

In the middle of the week, Zdravko Janic, the current commander of Croatia's special police, was called by subpoena to give evidence as a prosecution witness. At the time of Operation Storm, Janic was in command of a key axis of attack launched by the special police, and was also Markac's immediate subordinate.

During his testimony, Janic said he was unaware of the killing of Serb civilians on August 25, 1995 in the village of Grubori. According to the indictment, Croatian special forces killed five people aged between 45 and 90 in the village.

Janic, said he "didn't receive any information about that version of events in Grubori" and did not discuss it with Markac, nor was he asked to submit a report about it.

"I didn't know about those events because the commander of the Lucko unit [Josip Celic] didn't mention it in his oral report," said Janic, adding he only found out about it in 2004 when he found Celic's written report in an interior ministry archive.

According to Celic's report, his unit engaged in combat with Serb forces in Grubori and the civilians were killed in crossfire.

The presiding judge, Alphons Orié, told Janic, who was questioned as a suspect by UN investigators in 2005, that he had the right to refuse to answer questions that might jeopardise his position.

Goran Jungvirth is an IWPR-trained journalist in Zagreb.

**Location:** [Croatia](#)

**Topic:** [Courtside](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/knin-%E2%80%9CRandomly-targeted%E2%80%9D-operation-storm>