

Kordic & Cerkez Trial: 'The Same Immorality...'

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British journalist Dan Damon, a former Sky News TV reporter covering the war in Bosnia, presented his view of Dario Kordic's role in Central Bosnia. The Prosecutor is trying to prove Kordic's responsibility for crimes committed by members of the local Croatian Defence Council (HVO) Kordic was the key figure in the Bosnian Croat branch of Croatia's ruling HDZ party, and vice-president of the so-called Croatian Community Herzeg-Bosnia.

Dan Damon, who met Kordic on several occasions during the war, said he believed Kordic was "superior to (Bosnian Croat army colonel) Tihomir Blaskic who was a military man. Kordic gave political direction for Blaskic," he added. Damon also described Kordic as "polite, helpful and powerful", but also "clearly highly motivated, intelligent, cold and calculating in answers, clearly in charge, with an air of authority".

Kordic's defence disputes the claims that the defendant, as a political leader, was responsible for the crimes committed by the army. But Damon said that from what he learnt, "that was the hierarchy in the valley". For example, Damon testified that he was able to visit the HVO's Kaonik Prison unobstructed with Kordic's intervention, which was proof to the prosecutor that Kordic was in charge.

According to the statements of one protected prosecution witness, Kordic had played a role in a conflict that arose after the barricades were erected near the village of Ahmici in October 1992.

The Bosniaks say they set up a barricade in order to prevent the HVO from sending reinforcements to Novi Travnik - where the first Croat-Muslim conflict had taken place a day before. The Croats claim that the reinforcements were headed for Jajce, a town then under Serbian siege. Kordic, who lived in Busovaca, was at the time in Novi Travnik. One witness told the court how he was sent to represent the Bosniaks in Vitez at a meeting with Kordic in Novi Travnik about the barricade stand off.

According to the witness, Kordic set his side's terms - namely, the surrender of the Bosniak commanders of the Novi Travnik Brigade of the Territorial Defence and the surrender of their weapons. According to witnesses, Kordic told a press conference after the Novi Travnik incident that the town of Ahmici would "pay dearly for the barricade". The accounts add weight to the Prosecutor's claim that Kordic had an important military role in the entire Lasva Valley area. The Prosecutor holds Mario Cerkez, as a former commander of the HVO's Vitez Brigade, responsible for crimes in the Lasva Valley committed by soldiers under his command.

Witnesses from Vitez, Fuad Zeco and the witness L also spoke of the detention of Bosniaks in Vitez in April 1993. The Prosecutor is trying to show that after the launching of the military campaign on April 16, HVO soldiers illegally detained the Bosniak inhabitants of Vitez - implying the responsibility of Cerkez, then brigade commander. (One of the witnesses confirmed seeing Cerkez in the building of the cinema where several hundred Bosniak men were detained. He also stressed that the negotiations between the two sides on the release of detainees took place in Cerkez's office.)

The operational area of Cerkez's brigade included the village of Ahmici, entirely destroyed in an attack on April 16, 1993, with the loss of over 100 Bosniak lives. One protected witness testified about the attack but could not determine from the uniforms which unit did the killing in the village. Damon testified that in the days after the crime in Ahmici, he visited Bungalov, said to be the HQ of the so-called 'Jokers' paramilitary unit. "Hearsay had it," he said, "that it was a base of hard-line soldiers, paramilitaries who were responsible for Ahmici".

Asked what was going on, those soldiers responded by asking Damon if he had heard of Cajdras and atrocities against Croats there. But what Damon subsequently saw in Cajdras was not comparable to the atrocities in Ahmici. "In 1993, I saw the same immorality that had been used against Croatia in 1991, now used by Croats in Central Bosnia," said Damon. "There was a policy to purify the region, then a military campaign started in 1992," Damon said. "There was a plan by some Croatian officials to create Herzeg-Bosnia and annex it to Croatia. "Atrocities were committed by all sides, but in terms of the initiation of the spirit of ethnic purity, it was a tragedy for Croats - because similarities were greater than differences between Croats and Muslims."

Location: Croatia
Bosnia and
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Focus: International Criminal Tribunal for the former
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