

Kosovo Mother Describes Massacre of Family

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She testifies that Serb police killed all her relatives.

A Kosovo Albanian woman told the Hague tribunal this week that Serbian police gunned down nearly 40 of her relatives and left her for dead.

Shyhrete Berisha said that she was one of only three survivors of a series of incidents on March 26, 1999, during which Serbian officers in her home town of Suva Reka in Kosovo killed her entire family, including her husband and four children.

She was giving evidence at the trial of former Serbian police commander Vlastimir Djordjevic, who is charged with the murder, deportation and persecution of the Kosovo Albanian population between January 1 and June 20, 1999.

The defendant was head of the public security department of the Serbian interior ministry, MUP. According to the indictment against him, he took part in a conspiracy to forcibly expel and internally displace hundreds of thousands of Kosovo Albanians from their homes across the entire province of Kosovo.

Referring to the alleged events in Suva Reka, prosecutors claimed in their pre-trial brief that “on or about 26 March 1999, forces of the FRY [Federal Republic of Yugoslavia] and Serbia killed at least 47 members of the Berisha family in Suva Reka/Suhareke town and seriously wounded others”.

According to the witness’s testimony, there were “uninterrupted movements” of police around the town during the days following the NATO bombings on March 24, 1999.

On March 25, the day before the massacre, she was awoken at 5 am by Serb police dressed in camouflage uniforms with rifles over their shoulders, Berisha told the court.

The policemen beat her husband and demanded money because they knew that the Organisation for Security and Cooperation Europe, OSCE, was renting a section of the family’s house to use as its offices, said the witness.

“They said, ‘We will burn you all and blow this house up in the air with all the children in it,’” the witness told judges.

She recoiled as she recounted events, her hand shaking as she marked photographs and maps admitted into evidence by the judges.

On March 26, the family home was surrounded by police in camouflage uniforms, Berisha said, and one policeman whom she said she knew as “Zoran” swore at them and called them out of the house.

Zoran said they should “call their American friends to come and rescue them”, said the witness, in an apparent reference to NATO forces.

Six men, including Berisha’s husband, were then shot outside, prompting her and her four children to flee, she said. However, the group – which included other family members – was stopped nearby and forced into a pizzeria by police.

“We all went inside [and] they told us to sit down. As soon as we sat, they started to shoot. It was a burst of automatic fire,” she told the court, explaining that grenades were also thrown inside.

“They opened fire, [and] then they stopped. There were voices inside, they were throwing things in. Children [and] women were just dying afterwards. I could hear people crying.”

Berisha said that she survived the initial shooting and was then shot at again.

“When they saw I was alive, they fired again on my arm,” she told the court.

By pretending to be dead she was able to survive, she said.

“They thought I was dead, but I feigned [death]. They thought I was dead – that’s why they stopped firing.”

“I heard them speaking among themselves in Serbian. One of them [was talking about] killing women and children,” added the witness.

Berisha recounted how the bodies were then loaded onto a truck. Anyone who was still alive was shot again, she said.

“I was looking at my son to see whether he was still alive,” said the witness. “The Serb police killed everyone in our families.”

The truck then moved off laden with bodies, but it stopped further down the road and two other survivors – a woman and a boy – spoke, and then the three survivors jumped off the moving truck and were able to get help, according to the witness.

Djordjevic’s defence counsel Dragoljub Djordjevic, used its cross-examination of the witness to try to show that the massacre was not carried out by policemen from the Public Security Department, which was then headed by his client.

The defence lawyer then referred to testimony the witness gave about the massacre during another trial at the Serbian war crimes court in Belgrade, and put it to her that she had not seen who had conducted the attack in the pizzeria.

“You said [in Belgrade], ‘I have said more than once I could not see anyone in the pizzeria, whether they were policemen or civilians’,” said the counsel.

“What I said is that I was unable to recognise who was who,” replied the witness. “There was a group of policemen, but I was amidst children and women and I was unable to recognise them, but a group of policemen was there.”

Dragoljub Djordjevic also sought to shed doubt on the witness’s testimony concerning the policemen who knocked on the door of the family home on March 25.

The lawyer argued that an Albanian Kosovan woman would not usually answer the door to the family home, especially at 5 am. However, the witness explained that women and men were equal in her family and that she had answered the door because it was wartime and she knew it was not a conventional guest.

Asking her to describe the men’s uniforms, the witness was not able to give further details.

“The only thing you are certain about is you opened the door and there were people wearing uniforms and carrying weapons,” concluded the counsel.

Simon Jennings is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

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