

## **Kosovo Trial: Focus on Serb Command System**

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Prosecution witness in the Kosovo Six trial describes how Serbian general circumvented proper chain of command.

A former high-ranking officer in the military security service of the Yugoslav Army, VJ, testified about the irregular chain of command in the army that operated at the time of the Kosovo conflict in 1999.

Aleksandar Vasiljevic - who was the head of military security in the early 1990s, and returned as the deputy head in 1999 - also suggested his failure to cooperate with former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic resulted in his "enforced retirement".

Vasiljevic testified this week in the trial of six Serbian officials charged with responsibility for the forcible transfer of some 800,000 Kosovo Albanians during the conflict there in 1999.

On trial are former Serbian prime minister Milan Milutinovic; former Yugoslav deputy prime minister Nikola Sainovic; ex-chief of staff of the Yugoslav army Dragoljub Ojdanic; ex-Yugoslav army commanders Nebojsa Pavkovic and Vladimir Lazarevic; and ex-Kosovo police chief Sreten Lukic.

Vasiljevic also appeared in the trial of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic in February 2003.

He has been the subject of a tribunal investigation himself, after being named as a suspect in the 2001 indictment against Milosevic for crimes committed in Croatia.

This week, the witness described to the chamber how he was brought back from retirement to work as deputy head of security in 1999.

He had been pensioned off from his job as security chief for political reasons in 1992, he said, as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia disintegrated.

As he told it, the "new politics" which emerged led to an overhaul of the security services, and so he - along with eight others - was arrested, charged with "abuse of power" and thrown into prison. He was later acquitted and released after four months in jail.

He said his unwillingness to cooperate with Milosevic in 1992 resulted in his "enforced retirement".

"In March 1992, Milosevic invited me to come to talk to him and...requested me to provide him with information on security. I refused. This was the main reason I was retired," he claimed.

But when the NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia started in spring 1999, Vasiljevic decided for "patriotic reasons" that he was willing "to help out" in the army again, so he took up the post of the deputy head of military security.

This week, the witness also gave his opinion about the conditions surrounding the removal of Momcilo Perisic, Ojdanic's predecessor as chief of staff.

He said that Perisic was "removed" from his position in November 1998 because of a disagreement with Milosevic over the way that the emerging conflict in Kosovo was being handled.

Perisic, he said, wanted a state of emergency proclaimed in Kosovo to legalise the use of the army there, explaining that without that, it was only the Ministry of the Interior, MUP, forces that could operate in Kosovo.

The witness was asked about the statement he gave to the Office of the Prosecutor before coming to testify.

In this statement, he claimed that during 1999, the proper army chain of command of the army was circumvented by Pavkovic, who went directly to Milosevic, without the knowledge of his immediate boss, Ojdanic.

Vasiljevic reiterated this claim, and recounted an occasion in the summer of 1999, when he and Ojdanic traveled to the White Palace in Belgrade to see Milosevic.

The two arrived early, he said, and while they were waiting, they saw Pavkovic leave, presumably after a meeting with Milosevic.

According to Vasiljevic, Ojdanic complained that his subordinate Pavkovic "very often" came to see Milosevic without telling him.

"When we arrived at Milosevic's office, General Ojdanic said to him not to call his subordinates without his knowledge, but Milosevic said he was not there in an official capacity - he just dropped by," said the witness.

Vasiljevic suspected that Pavkovic had earned Milosevic's favour in 1998 when he was willing to use the VJ in Kosovo without a state of emergency, in contrast to Persisic.

He said that as far as he knew, Pavkovic's promotion in December 1998 - from commander of the Pristina Corps to chief of Yugoslavia's Third Army, which had responsibility for Kosovo, did not follow the normal protocol.

Pavkovic, he said, was related to the Milosevic family through his wife, who had family ties to the former president's wife, Mira Markovic.

"The general belief was that it is on account of that relationship that he enjoyed the confidences of the

Milosevices,” he said.

This week, Vasiljevic also testified about the tightening up of regulations surrounding the enlistment of volunteers into the army at that time.

The situation was quite different from that of the early Nineties, during the conflicts in Bosnia and Croatia, when he admitted that he was aware of “problems” with paramilitaries units, although didn’t say what these were.

New rules meant that groups of paramilitaries were not permitted – only individuals – and volunteers had to go through a rigorous screening process, he said.

The trial continues next week.

Caroline Tosh is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

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