

Krajisnik: Europe Wrecked Compromise Talks

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Overly hasty recognition of Bosnian independence was a trigger for war, claims Serb parliamentary speaker.

Momcilo Krajisnik this week claimed efforts by the Serb political leadership to seek a peaceful compromise with Muslims and Croats before the outbreak of war were ruined by Europe's premature recognition of the independent state of Bosnia and Hercegovina in April 1992.

The former Bosnian Serb parliamentary speaker, who is testifying in his own defence at the Hague tribunal, faces charges of genocide, crimes against humanity and violating the laws and customs of war in connection with atrocities committed against non-Serbs during the conflict.

The trial, which started in March 2003, is nearing its end and Krajisnik must finish his testimony before June 13.

His defence lawyers have argued that their client had little knowledge of or direct control over events on the ground, which were mainly in the hands of highly independent local authorities.

He was also speaker of a separate Serb assembly set up in 1991, and Krajisnik testified that in this capacity he encouraged fellow Serbs to continue to attend the central Sarajevo sessions and work through the looming crisis by negotiating.

The main goal of those discussions, he said, was the transformation of Bosnia into a complex unit of three states divided along ethnic lines, guaranteeing respect for human rights in each.

Krajisnik said it was the European Community that wrecked this peaceful process when they acknowledged Bosnia's independence, following the 1992 referendum that was boycotted by the Bosnian Serbs.

"The referendum for independence did not cause the war... It was rather the premature decision of the European Community to recognise independence after the referendum and before we finished negotiations [that was] one of the triggers," Krajisnik told the court.

"The Serb negotiation delegation felt betrayed," continued Krajisnik, describing their feelings after learning that Bosnia was being recognised as an independent state, before their proposals had been seriously discussed.

He went on to deny prosecution claims that a document called the Six Strategic Goals - which defined the Serbs' key objective as "Serb separation from Bosnia's other nationalities" - was a roadmap to ethnically clean Serb territories in Bosnia. Instead, he said it was simply a "Serb platform for negotiations". The other strategic goals involved the establishment of corridors and borders to allow the Serbs to live in one territory attached to Serbia proper.

"[A] sovereign, untransformed and independent republic of Bosnia and Hercegovina was unacceptable for us," he said. "We required sovereignty for [the] constituent people, and we were against unilateral solutions."

As he did during his testimony last week, Krajisnik again tried to justify statements made by various members of the Serb parliament in Bosnia as well as remarks by the wartime Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadzic, who is on the run after being indicted for genocide by the Hague tribunal.

He explained that when Karadzic said that Serbs in Bosnia had two options - to find a political solution or win its own territory by force - that he actually meant that war was a bad solution for Serbs.

As for Karadzic's infamous statement that "we will release our tigers and let them do their job ... We cannot hold our people back any more", he explained it "meant nothing".

"There were no tigers or any radical elements ... It was expression of powerlessness," said Krajisnik.

Several weeks later, at the end of March 1992, members of the infamous paramilitary group Arkan's Tigers and other Serb forces attacked and took control of the Bosnian town of Bijeljina.

A fiery speech in the Serb assembly by deputy Goran Zekic that the "Serb task is to destroy Bosnia as Yugoslavia was destroyed by others" was not warmongering, explained Krajisnik. "Zekic is good and brave man, who liked to express in epic way," he said.

He then said the term "human relocation" was first used by the late Croatian president Franjo Tudjman, and that the relocation of people was never part of any official statement of Serb policy in Bosnia.

"Our recommendation to Serbs was to remain where they were, and that they did not have any reason to go," he said.

Krajisnik claimed that the war started with the killing of a member of a Serb wedding party by a member of the Patriotic League - considered by Serbs as a Muslim paramilitary militia - in Sarajevo's old town on March 1, 1992, immediately after the independence referendum.

Serbs were then overwhelmed by a sense of fear and mistrust, said Krajisnik, and "soon after barricades and check points mushroomed in all parts of the town.

"[The] Serb leadership did not know what would happen, and we could not control it."

He insisted that the setting up of "crisis staffs" - which the prosecution allege directed the "forced transfers and deportations" of non-Serbs - was nothing unusual and suggested the system was also used before the war whenever a problem or crisis cropped up. "Even small villages formed crisis staffs in early 1992," explained Krajisnik.

He denied that he or any other senior Serbian Democratic Party, SDS, members were personally involved in any preparations for war.

He also insisted that he did not have full control over what was happening, citing a decree from Banja Luka on forming a separate Serb ministry of internal affairs in Bosnia that he and Karadzic received while at a negotiating session in Brussels between Muslims, Croats and Serbs.

“Karadzic and I were totally confused... it struck us like lighting. This was a blow... a bad political blow which undermined negotiations,” said Krajisnik.

He blamed Momcilo Mandic, than vice-minister of internal affairs of Bosnia, for not being in line with what the SDS leadership wanted at that time. “This decree - which included orders, norms for training and arming, proclamations of insignia and emblems - was unilateral and never confirmed by the Assembly,” he added.

When Judge Alphons Orie asked Krajisnik why the Serb leadership did not to react publicly to this “unilateral decree” to establish Serb police in Bosnia, he replied that there wasn’t time, adding “we did not want to create additional confusion”, because, although Mandic’s timing was premature, having their own Serb police force was part of his party’s long term policy.

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