

## **Krajisnik Linked to Expulsions**

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As trial reconvenes, prosecution seeks to link defendant with ethnic cleansing campaigns.

After another long break, the trial of Bosnian Serb top war-time political leader Momcilo Krajisnik continued this week with the prosecution painting a dramatic picture of the first months of war in western Bosnia.

The prosecution is trying to build up its case against Krajisnik by describing the campaigns of ethnic cleansing in different regions of Bosnia and then connecting them to accused. Krajisnik was at the time the head of the Bosnian Serb assembly and one of the top officials in the ruling Serbian Democratic Party, SDS.

The witnesses who testified this week included two prisoners of the notorious Manjaca camp set up in western Bosnia by the Serb forces in the summer of 1992 - one of whom was a survivor of a massacre near the city of Sanski Most. The third witness was a UN official employed at the time in neighbouring Croatia.

The first to take the stand was Mirzet Karabeg, the head of the executive board in the Sanski Most municipality. The latter is one of the areas explicitly named in the Krajisnik indictment as the "most extreme" examples of the campaign of "partial destruction" of Bosnian Muslims conducted at the time.

Karabeg testified about how the local SDS leadership showed growing signs of planning to take over the Sanski Most municipality. By late spring of 1992, the largest part of western Bosnia was proclaimed the "Autonomous Region of Krajina" (ARK) and put under Serb control.

The Sanski Most municipality bordered this area and the SDS leadership was keen to annex it.

The witness testified that his friend and colleague, the head of the municipality, Vlado Vrkes, was the one who put the issue of annexation on the agenda of the local assembly. When the witness asked him why he did that, Vrkes replied he was under pressure from "above" - and Karabeg said his friend meant by this the head of the regional crisis staff Radoslav Brdjanin and the defendant, Momcilo Krajisnik.

The Krajisnik defence seized upon this testimony, comparing it to numerous other statements the witness gave to the prosecutors during the years of their investigation, as well as to his testimony in the recently finished trial of Brdjanin. In none of these documents did Karabeg mention that his friend explicitly said the pressure came from Krajisnik.

Another courtroom battle was waged over Karabeg's testimony that he saw Krajisnik on TV footage from a celebration in Banja Luka together with Karadzic and the General Momir Talic, who was at the time in charge of Serb army forces in western Bosnia - a pointer to another link between the SDS leadership and the events in western Bosnia.

The defence tried to challenge this bit of evidence by questioning the memory of the witness as well as his credibility. Counsel produced a newspaper clipping with a photograph allegedly taken at the same gathering, on which Krajisnik was not to be seen. But the presiding judge felt the photograph was misleading and refused to accept it into evidence without further research.

Much more dramatic was the testimony of Raif Begic, the survivor of a massacre at the Vrhpolje bridge

near Sanski Most - one of the many dark episodes of the Bosnian war to figure in Krajisnik's indictment.

Several weeks after disarming his village of Donji Begici near Sanski Most, Serb troops entered the village. Begic and some 20 other men were separated from their families and together with other men from a neighbouring hamlet, taken to Vrhpolje bridge. They were told buses were waiting for them there to take them to an unknown location.

The captors led the men through vineyards and orchards to the Vrhpolje bridge, threatening to kill those who were lagging behind. When they arrived, they saw another group of Serb soldiers, waiting for them. "Some were my schoolmates...We were neighbours. I knew them all," Begic said.

One of the soldiers told the Muslim men to line up along the bridge fence, and to take off their clothes and shoes. "He said they will kill 70 Muslims today because some Serbs were killed earlier that day in some battles," Begic said. "And then they asked if there was anyone among us who could jump nicely in the river."

One of the Serb soldiers pointed at the first man in the row, Midhet Ceric. "He said that Cera was very good at jumping into the water, and he ordered him to jump. Cera turned round, he climbed the fence, and jumped off. You could hear him swimming underneath the bridge as he was passing by."

Begic said two other soldiers were "standing on the other side of the bridge, and they pointed their automatic rifles at him. When he appeared a little further down the stream, they fired a barrage of bullets at him and you could see his dead body floating down the river."

The killings and beatings then continued. When Begic's turn came, he also jumped but then managed to stay hidden under the bridge and let his shirt float in the river. The soldiers shot at his shirt, while he dived to the other side of the river and stayed there hidden in the bushes until the massacres were over.

From there, he could still hear what was going on at the bridge. "After the beating, after the killings, you could hear a rather long burst of fire. I believe that that was when they were killed," he said.

"There was silence after that and you heard nothing more, no one moaning, no one being thrown into the water."

Several days later Begic was arrested by Serb troops and eventually transported to the Manjaca camp, which he also survived.

The defence for Krajisnik kept the cross-examination of this witness very short, limiting itself only to straightening out a few imprecisely given dates regarding his transport to Manjaca.

The week also saw somewhat less dramatic, but potentially more damning testimony of a Kenyan officer in charge of the UN troops keeping the fragile peace in the parts of Croatia neighbouring western Bosnia.

Softly spoken and impeccably polite, Charles Kirudja went through details of his earlier witness statement.

In this statement, already used in the Brdjanin trial, Kirudja described how Bosnian Serb officials from

neighbouring municipalities tried to pressure UN troops in Croatia to “ensure free passage” for thousands of Bosnian Muslims who allegedly voluntarily wanted to leave their houses.

The Serb officials explained to the disbelieving UN soldiers that they had to accept the “new reality” forming across the border. And this new reality, they said, was that Serbs have taken power and Muslims were increasingly realising “they could not live side by side with the Serbs”.

He said the Serbs told them that Muslims had refused to sign the allegiance of loyalty offered to them by the new Serb authorities and how some of refused to surrender their weapons to Serb troops.

Some representatives of local Serbs even presented Kirudja with copies of Muslims’ letters stating they were leaving voluntarily and leaving all their possessions to the local Serb government.

All these visitors to the UN offices in Croatia were high- ranking local political leaders. Even the head of the self-proclaimed Autonomous Region of Krajina, Vojo Kupresanin, called his unit on one occasion to pressure them into securing free passage of some 15,000 Muslim “voluntary” refugees.

The UN repeatedly refused to get involved in the plan. Kirudja told the tribunal that he explained to the Serb representatives that “UN would never agree to make people refugees, who were still in their houses”.

In one of his many reports to his superiors, he stated that the refugee problem “was not a humanitarian problem, but a political problem, related to the policy of ethnic cleansing”.

But the UN was aware of the fact that increasing pressure was put on Muslims to leave. In another of his reports, Kirudja wrote, “Behind the border in the forest, unthinkable atrocities may be unfolding.”

So when the first columns of Muslim refugees finally appeared in the UN zone of responsibility in the end of July that year nobody was surprised. The UN assisted them, but still refused to cooperate with the Bosnian Serb representatives. “A stream of refugees kept coming” their way “well into September,” Kirudja’s statement read. “...With an average of 30-50 people per day.”

This testimony may be especially damaging in light of the close connections that municipality officials had with Krajisnik. The minutes from a session in late March 1992 and presented by the prosecution in the beginning of trial, show Krajisnik addressing the heads of Serb municipal crisis staffs - telling them that they might soon have to “start implementing what we’ve already agreed upon: ethnic separation on the ground”.

The Krajisnik trial will continue next week with possibly a week-long testimony of the former leader of Serbs in Croatia, Milan Babic.

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