

## **Massacre Survivor Testifies**

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Captives from a Muslim village were put on a bus, then slaughtered.

A witness who survived a massacre of 48 Bosnian Muslim soldiers in 1992 gave a horrific account of his experience to the courtroom this week in the trial of former Bosnian Serb leader Momcilo Krajisnik.

The event is listed in the indictment against Krajisnik, a former president of the Republika Srpska assembly and one of the leaders of the nationalist Serbian Democratic Party who is generally viewed as having been second in command to former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic.

Krajisnik stands accused of being involved in planning and ordering ethnic cleansing of non-Serbs from various parts of Bosnia during the 1992-95 war.

The witness, Elvir Jahic, told the court in November how he and 55 other men were captured by Serb forces in June 1992, after the fall of the small Muslim village of Ahatovici southwest of Sarajevo.

The Muslim captives were beaten, tortured and humiliated in a detention centre in Rajlovac.

They were then driven by bus to what they were thought would be a prisoner exchange, but it never happened. Instead, Jahic said, they were massacred inside the vehicle, and only eight survived.

Very slowly and in an extremely quiet voice, Jahic, a dark-haired man in his late thirties, began his testimony by describing events in the village of Ahatovici on May 29, 1992, when Serb forces from the nearby Yugoslav army barracks in Rajlovac and Butile began shelling the village "out of the blue". According to Jahic, the shelling was relentless –villagers hiding in cellars counted about 6,000 incoming projectiles blasting their homes over five days.

When the shelling stopped on June 2, the villagers were finally able to leave their shelters, and found that their homes had been burned to the ground. Jahic said that he and about 120 poorly-armed men from his village tried to mount a defence as best they could, but they were unable to resist the onslaught from Serb infantry and artillery attacks for long. Those who had not been killed in the battle surrendered soon afterwards.

The prisoners were then taken to the barracks in Rajlovac, where they were kept in a hangar for almost two weeks in inhuman conditions, being beaten and tortured on a regular basis, Jahic said.

On June 14, 56 Muslim prisoners from Ahatovici were ordered onto a bus. Jahic said they assumed they were going to be exchanged for Serb prisoners.

"I was standing close to the rear window of the bus, and I could see we were escorted by four vehicles full of armed men," said the witness, his hands slightly shaking.

As the journey continued, the prisoners were ordered to lie down on the floor.

The witness said that when the bus came to a halt, “we were told to remain on the floor, that there was an engine problem. The driver and the guards all went out, but we were not allowed to move.”

“Then there was a devastating blast, and another, and another.” The witness said the bus was first hit with three grenades fired from hand-held launchers, and then about ten hand-grenades were thrown in through the broken windows. Small-arms fire was also directed at the bus.

“Body parts were flying everywhere, shrapnel, bullets... there was blood all over me. I was hit by pieces of blown up skulls, hair...,” said Jahic.

The witness soon realised he was seriously wounded, and when the shooting finally stopped and the cars escorting the bus left the murder scene, he crawled to a nearby stream.

As the pain was unbearable, Jahic described how he tried to commit suicide, first by hanging himself and then by drowning, “I put my head into the stream, took a stone and started beating myself on the head, hoping to lose consciousness.”

The seven other survivors were not so seriously injured, so they managed to escape through the woods while Jahic remained behind.

The prosecution showed the court a videotape recorded on June 15, the day after the massacre, showing the shattered bus and a freshly-dug mass grave full of badly disfigured bodies in civilian clothes, with heads and limbs missing. All the bodies were exhumed in 1996, after the Bosnian war.

Prosecutors also played a recording of an intercepted telephone conversation dated June 15 between Momcilo Krajisnik and his brother Mirko, in which the latter informs the accused that the bus carrying Muslim prisoners “was attacked by Muslim [soldiers] who believed that there were Serbs on board; they killed everyone in it”.

“Yeah?” was Krajisnik’s only response.

Elvir Jahic dismissed this version of the event as “completely untrue”, because there were no clashes between Serb and Muslim forces in the area of the massacre that day.

The recording could, however, backfire on the prosecution, because it might be used to suggest that Krajisnik was not always fully apprised of crimes committed by Serb forces in the early stages of the war.

Another intercepted telephone conversation played in court this week – this time between Karadzic and a man identified only as Cedo – appeared to show a similar lack of awareness of the massacre as described by Jahic. In the conversation, dated May 30, a day after the Serb attack on Ahatovici began, Karadzic was notified by Cedo that “Muslims from Ahatovici attacked the Rajlovac barracks, but were repelled”.

One aspect of these phone conversations that remains unclear is whether the speakers were aware that their calls were being intercepted.

In another development this week, Krajisnik's defence counsel Chrissa Loukas informed the court that she had formally filed motion to withdraw from the case both due to her heavy workload, and because "the defence has had inadequate time to prepare".

The other defence counsel, Nicholas Stewart, told IWPR he would remain on the case, despite major difficulties the team is faced with.

Loukas and Stewart took over Krajisnik's defence about a year ago after his previous counsel, Serbian-American lawyer Deyan Ranko Brasich, was disbarred in the United States for overcharging clients.

Krajisnik's trial continues next week.

Merdijana Sadovic is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

**Location:** Bosnia and  
Herzegovina

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