

Mladic Ejected After "Lying" Comment

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Defendant heard making disparaging remarks about witness who told court of Srebrenica massacre experiences.

Former Bosnian Serb army chief Ratko Mladic was thrown out of a courtroom in The Hague this week after judges reprimanded him for remarks in which he appeared to accuse the survivor of a mass execution at Srebrenica of lying.

The protected witness, referred to in court as RM-346, was giving testimony in Mladic's trial. He told the court how he survived the shooting of more than 1,000 of his fellow prisoners at the Branjevo farm near Zvornik on July 16, 1995.

Five days earlier, on July 11, the Srebrenica enclave had fallen to Bosnian Serb forces under Mladic's command. More than 7,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were then captured and killed at locations in the surrounding area, in the worst atrocity in Europe since the Second World War.

Srebrenica is one of the central elements in the indictment against Mladic, who commanded the Bosnian Serb army from 1992 to 1996, as is the 44-month siege of Sarajevo that left nearly 12,000 people dead.

Prosecutors allege that Mladic is responsible for crimes of genocide, persecution, extermination, murder and forcible population transfer which "contributed to achieving the objective of the permanent removal of Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats from Bosnian Serb-claimed territory".

Mladic was arrested in Serbia in May 2011 after 16 years as a fugitive.

RM-346 said he was captured by Bosnian Serb forces at Nova Kasaba, and then held with 1,500 to 2,000 other prisoners at a football field. Then Mladic appeared.

"While we were waiting, Mladic came and checked out all the prisoners, standing quite close to me, some 20 metres away," the witness said.

Mladic told the prisoners that they need not worry and that they would be exchanged, the witness recalled. RM-346 said the accused ordered a list to be drawn up with all their names on it.

RM-346 said this him gave hope, but he remained "cautious" because only metres away, a prisoner was being beaten, and did not survive. Mladic did not react to this incident, despite being present, the witness said.

During the night they spent at the football field, several prisoners were taken away and did not return, RM-346 said. With several other prisoners, he was then taken to a sports hall in a village called Pilica.

RM-346 told the chamber that he witnessed prisoners from another bus being murdered behind this building.

When they were transported from Pilica on July 16, supposedly to be "exchanged", all the prisoners ended up at the farm in Branjevo, where they were lined up and shot.

RM-346 said he escaped execution by a "mere miracle". A bullet passed between his jacket and his arm, and he kept silent when soldiers asked whether anyone was still alive.

Together with another prisoner, RM-346 found refuge under a nearby bridge. He intended to escape to territory held by the Bosnian government army, but was too exhausted to run and decided to surrender to Serb soldiers.

They sent him to the Batkovic prison camp in the northeastern town of Bijeljina, where he was held until December 1995.

At one point during the witness' testimony, Mladic asked for permission to leave the room for a few minutes to "freshen up", which he was allowed to do. As he returned, he could be heard speaking loudly and saying that the witness was "lying and making things up." It was unclear whether he was speaking to his lawyer or addressing the witness directly.

As a result, the witness complained that the defendant had called him a "liar". Observers in the courtroom reported hearing Mladic directing nationalist insults at the witness and also insulting the presiding judge.

The chamber informed the accused that he would be removed from the courtroom, and that he had already been warned on several occasions not to speak loudly or insult witnesses.

Mladic's lawyer Branko Lukic contended that no insults had been delivered, and that Mladic had merely told his co-counsel Miodrag Stojanovic that the "witness had learned everything he was saying by heart".

The outburst occurred after Mladic had been absent from court for two days because he felt unwell following a medical procedure.

During cross-examination, Stojanovic asked the witness "how on earth it was possible for a bullet to pass" between his body and arm without injuring him when his hands were "allegedly tied".

RM-346 said that it was "indeed possible" and only "dear God" had helped him.

Stojanovic then focused on the witness's statement that Mladic was present at the football field in Nova Kasaba when a prisoner was beaten to death by Bosnian Serb forces. The lawyer referred to statements the witness had made to the Bosnian authorities in 1996, and claimed that there were "discrepancies between dates mentioned in those statements and the statement" which RM-346 later gave.

The witness said that while he might not be sure of the exact time of the event because of the intense emotions associated with the experience, he was nevertheless sure that Mladic was there during the incident.

The trial continues next week.

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