

## **Mladic Witness Claims Non-Serbs Left Town Voluntarily**

**Author:** [Daniella Peled](#)

Former municipal official says 8,000 Bosniaks remained in Sanski Most at the end of the war.

A former Bosnian Serb official told the Hague tribunal last week that there was no organised plan to expel non-Serbs from the northwestern municipality of Sanski Most during the war in Bosnia.

Vinko Nikolic, a former member of the municipal Crisis Staff in Sanski Most, was appearing as a defence witness in the trial of wartime Bosnian Serb army commander Ratko Mladic.

Sanski Most is one of the municipalities in which Mladic is charged with acts of persecution committed in pursuit of the “objective to permanently remove Bosnian Muslims and/or Bosnian Croats” living there.

Nikolic previously testified in the Hague trial of wartime Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadzic, and the statement he gave then was offered into evidence in the Mladic trial.

Defence lawyer Branko Lukic read a summary of the statement, which he said showed there had been no plan to expel Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) or Croats from Sanski Most.

“There are lots of examples where Muslims continued to work in the municipality, in the land registry or as schoolteachers,” he read. “From 1992 to 1995, more than 8,000 Muslims continued to live in Sanski Most municipality.”

Amir Zec, counsel for the prosecution, began his examination by clarifying Nikolic’s wartime role as a member of the Sanski Most Crisis Staff and also of the Serb Defence Forces, known as the SOS.

The SOS was a paramilitary group which was absorbed into the Bosnian Serb army early on in the conflict as a special unit of the 6th Sana Brigade.

The witness rejected Zec’s claims that the SOS armed Serbs in Sanski Most before the conflict broke out.

“It was not organised,” he said.

Zec produced an SOS document from May 1991 – about a year before conflict broke out in the area – in which Nikolic was quoted as referring to “these young men; I’m thinking of the seven lads who tirelessly brought weapons from various warehouses and points and armed the Serb people, risking that the weapons fall into the hands of Ustashe [pejorative term for Croats] and Green Berets [Bosniak paramilitary group]”.

“So Mr Nikolic, this is a reflection of your activities related to the arming of Serb people in Sanski Most before the conflict, right?” Zec asked.

“I’ve already said that that had not been organised,” Nikolic replied. “Individuals who had the possibility of getting weapons armed their neighbours and family members.”

The prosecutor went on to list other SOS actions which included destroying buildings owned by non-Serbs and detaining Bosniak and Croat political leaders.

On the detentions, the witness said, “There were arrests on orders from the Crisis Staff and the public police station during the months of April and May... to bring in extremists, armed Muslims and their representatives.”

Zec pressed the witness on this point, saying, “Mr Nikolic, the reality is the SOS was involved in blowing up the buildings and [the] capture of non-Serb leaders in order to intimidate [the] non-Serbian population in Sanski Most. That is the reality, right?”

“No, this was not done in an organised way, it was only individuals who would have done this,” the witness replied

Zec read out an excerpt from another SOS report which stated, “We fellow-Serbs carried out a raid on the Sanski Most SDK [public auditing service], took away the keys from the stubborn Croatian woman director who refused any form of cooperation or agreement and continued according to plan”.

Nikolic denied that this had been done by force.

The prosecutor continued, “You say that all citizens of Sanski Most, regardless of their ethnicity, were

allowed to remain in their jobs if they respected the constitution of Republika Srpska. And in fact, Mr Nikolic, this is not correct. We have already seen the example of the forcible removal of the Croat director of the SDK before the war. After the Serb takeover, other non-Serbs were also removed from their posts in other municipal institutions such as the health centre and the court. You know that, right?"

Nikolic said he was aware of this, explaining that the individuals removed were "prominent and extremist" members of the Bosniak-led Party of Democratic Action.

Presiding Judge Orié asked how it was established that an individual was an extremist.

Nikolic said police alleged that the health centre's director had given vast sums of money to arm Bosniak paramilitaries, while the head of the court had stolen money and gold from the safe.

Judge Orié suggested that the defence should obtain any records relating to this police investigation.

"If you could get hold of that material for evaluation of evidence, [that] would assist far more than sweeping statements," Judge Orié continued. "The chamber wants facts."

Zec went on to discuss other cases where Bosniaks were replaced by Serbs in public institutions.

Nikolic said there had been a number of voluntary resignations.

"We only replaced the president of the court based on the evidence we had against him. The other officials included Serbs, Croats and Muslims - they were not only Muslims," he said.

"And those Serbs who left the court - they were not then later appointed again?" Zec asked.

Nikolic acknowledged that the new court head chose to reappoint the Serb officials.

Judge Christoph Flügge asked why the officials who resigned were then detained and sent to Manjaca, a prison camp near Banja Luka.

The witness said had been on the front line at the time and did not know why this had happened.

The prosecution raised the case of Nedžad Muhic, one of the judges who lost his job in Sanski Most. Together with other detainees, Muhic suffocated to death on a truck en route to Manjaca "due to great heat and lack of oxygen".

"This happened because they were packed into trucks with no ventilation, correct?" Zec asked.

The witness agreed.

Zec disputed Nikolic's statement that 8,000 Muslims remained in Sanski Most by the end of the war. The true figure was 3,500, he said.

The witness said he stood by his assertion that 8,000 Muslims and Croats remained in the municipality by 1995.

As for the claim that non-Serbs left voluntarily, the prosecutor said, "The reality is, Mr Nikolic, that Serb authorities wanted Sanski Most to be a Serbian town and they held the view that the most efficient procedure was to transfer Muslims and Croats from Sanski Most to central Bosnia - correct?"

"At the meetings of Crisis Staff that I attended there was no mention of the mass movement out of the other two ethnic communities. Another matter are the wishes of certain officials but I'm not going into that," the witness replied.

Zec then turned to minutes from a July 1992 meeting of the executive committee of the Sanski Most municipal assembly which read, "We have to persist in this work because this is what the soldiers and the people of Sanski Most demand of us, because this has to be a Serbian town."

He also read out an excerpt from Informator magazine, published by the municipal board of the SDS, the Serb Democratic Party, which in June 1992 reported that the "most efficient way and the most peaceful solutions to our national strife is the transfer of people from one area to another".

He continued, "So this is a reflection of the reality, Mr Nikolic - the Serb authorities wanted Sanski Most to be a Serb town, which was achieved through various methods, one of which was transfer of Muslims and Croats from Sanski Most to central Bosnia, right?"

"Well at that time I was not a member of the SDS or executive board and I was not a member of any administrations," the witness replied, adding, "These are conclusions that were reached while I was at the front line."

Judge Flügge asked a follow-up question to clarify whether the reason for moving out Muslims and Croats was to ensure that Sanski Most was a Serb town.

“That was probably the reason,” Nikolic replied.

Prosecutors allege that Mladic was 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”. He is accused of the massacre of more than 7,000 men and boys at Srebrenica in July 1995, and of planning and overseeing the siege of Sarajevo that left nearly 12,000 people dead.

**Daniella Peled is an IWPR editor in London.**

**Location:** Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Topic:** Crimes Against Humanity  
War crimes

**Focus:** ICTY - Ratko Mladić Trial  
International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/mladic-witness-claims-non-serbs-left-town>