

Mladic Witness Disputes Date of Srebrenica Meeting

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Prosecution accuses senior Serb officer of changing his testimony.

A defence witness in The Hague has disputed the timing of a crucial meeting which Bosnian Serb army chief Ratko Mladic held with senior staff officers after the fall of Srebrenica.

Miodrag Dragutinovic, who was assistant to the chief of staff of the Zvornik Brigade at the time, said the meeting took place late on the evening of July 11, 1995, the day the enclave fell to Serb forces. The prosecution contends that it actually meeting happened in Bratunac the following day, July 12.

Mladic stands accused of genocide and other crimes relating to the Srebrenica massacre of July 1995. The eastern Bosnian town was declared a “safe area” in 1993 and a United Nations peacekeeping battalion was assigned to protect it. Despite this special status, the Srebrenica enclave was seized by Bosnian Serb forces on July 11. In the days that followed, more than 7,000 Bosniak men and boys were murdered by Bosnian Serb forces.

Instead of reading out a summary of the witness statement, defence lawyer Miodrag Stojanovic questioned Dragutinovic in court.

The witness described the combat activities of early July 1995, which were focused on engaging with the 28th Division of the Bosnian government army in the enclave of Srebrenica.

“Could you please tell the trial chamber whether you had any particular orders with regard to the civilian population, should you have any encounters with them in the combat area?” Stojanovic asked.

The witness replied, “The standing order was that the objective of our combat activities was not civilians, it was not the enclave or UNPROFOR [United Nations Peacekeeping Force] units. Our objective was exclusively the 28th Division, which was a permanent danger for the units of the Drina Corps.”

Dragutinovic said he had been slightly injured in a NATO airstrike and spent the night of July 11-12 in a medical unit at Zeleni Jadar. He refused to go to Zvornik for further treatment and instead returned to Srebrenica “some time between 9 and 10 am” on the morning of July 12, travelling in the command vehicle of Zvornik Brigade commander Vinko Pandurevic.

The witness said Pandurevic told him he had attended “a briefing in Bratunac” the previous night – in other words July 11. The meeting concerned “previous combat activities and future tasks”, one of these being that “units were to be deployed in the Zepa sector to engage the Zepa brigade and neutralise its members”.

Arriving in Srebrenica on the morning of July, the witness said, he saw no civilians at all and found the town itself to be “a sore sight”.

“I had known Srebrenica from before as a small tourist place, and I live in a similar town, but it was in a state of disarray,” he explained. “However, there were no signs of destruction. I could not observe any signs of previous combat in the town itself.”

In his cross-examination, prosecutor Peter McCloskey similarly focused on the events of July 11 and 12, 1995. He read out a long excerpt from Dragutinovic’s statement which referred to a meeting which Pandurevic attended on the orders of Mladic and Drina Corps commander General Radislav Krstic.

“According to this statement, you don’t hear anything about Zepa until the evening of July 12. But now you have testified for the first time that you heard before that. How do you explain this important difference?”

he asked.

The witness said the discrepancy was probably an “oversight” on his part.

McCloskey asked the witness whether he had met any old army colleagues during his current stay in The Hague.

Dragutinovic said that Milenko Jevdjevic, a defence witness who testified immediately before him in the Mladic case, had been staying at same hotel.

While giving testimony, Jevdjevic too claimed that Mladic’s meeting with brigade commanders in Bratunac took place on July 11, 1995.

“You have just testified that you had said you hadn’t learnt about the Zepa orders before,” said McCloskey. “Is it not correct that Mr Jevdjevic had kind of reminded you that that’s what happened; that Mladic gave an order to go to Zepa?”

“No, no, absolutely not, not about that,” the witness replied.

“What part of the story did you talk about?” the prosecutor aid, again with reference to Dragutinovic’s recent encounter with the Jevdjevic.

“We mostly talked about our common acquaintances who were with us in the area of Srebrenica, and I did not go into his testimony because I am an elderly person now and all of this tires me out and I didn’t want to be filled with something that would make this stay more difficult,” Dragutinovic said.

McCloskey noted that in previous testimony, the witness never said he learnt about the impending Zepa operation from the July 11 meeting.

“Yet after speaking to Mr Jevdjevic – and I don’t know what was said or if anything was said – you come into this court and testify for the first time that you learnt from the July 11 meeting that Zepa was the main operation,” the prosecutor said. “How come it’s today for the first time, in 2015, that we hear this from you?”

Dragutinovic denied he had heard this information from Jevdjevic, and said he could not understand why he had stated this fact in previous appearances at the Hague tribunal.

The prosecutor continued to probe him on the issue, concluding, “The reason I believe that you have never mentioned orders from General Mladic on July 11 before was because you spent July 12 marching in combat formation to find the Muslims in Sucevka, and you knew it made no military sense to receive an order on the 12th of July,” McCloskey said, “until for some reason this testimony you have now come up with [about] receiving an order from Mladic on July 11.”

“You’re not right,” the witness replied.

McCloskey then turned to a “green covered notebook that we have seen frequently in this case... known as the Zvornik brigade duty officer’s notebook” and read out an entry from July 16, 1995.

“It is forbidden to shoot at aerial targets until 2200 hours. All units informed about that,” he read. The witness confirmed this was the case.

The prosecutor alleges that Mladic flew out of the area by helicopter on the evening of that day, July 16, whereas the defence says he travelled the following day.

In his further examination, defence lawyer Stojanovic said the order prohibiting Bosnian Serb forces from firing on aircraft was issued because there were aircraft carrying humanitarian aid.

“UNPROFOR helicopters and helicopters of other humanitarian organisations often flew over the area controlled by the Zvornik brigade,” the witness said. “That was one of their flight corridors when they flew

from Belgrade to Sarajevo or some other direction... it was very difficult to identify an aircraft and say who it belonged to.”

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