

## **Mladic Witness Unaware of Wartime Crimes**

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Former senior officer said it was impossible to know whether his forces caused destruction.

The wartime commander of the Bosnian Serb army's largest corps told the trial of Ratko Mladic this week that he had been unaware of any crimes committed in his area of responsibility.

Defence witness Bosko Kelecevic was chief-of-staff of the 1st Krajina Corps. Prosecutor Arthur Traldi spent the first part of his cross-examination establishing Kelecevic's position in the Bosnian Serb army (VRS), detailing the chain of command and establishing that the core command was kept informed about events on the battlefield.

Traldi suggested that the 1st Krajina Corps was the largest unit of the army "in terms of manpower and responsibility".

Kelecevic agreed, adding that with 67,000 fighters "it may have been the largest corps in Europe".

According to the indictment against Mladic, several of the parts of Bosnia where the persecution of non-Serbs reached the scale of genocide were in the area of responsibility of the 1st Krajina Corps.

Its wartime commander Momir Talic was indicted for war crimes by Hague tribunal prosecutors, but the case was dropped after his death in May 2003.

Traldi noted that Talic had been on trial for "genocide, persecution, extermination, torture, deportation, wanton destruction and other crimes".

"He was tried but the trial was not... completed, and I do not see him as a war criminal or as someone who would have committed the crimes that you list here," the witness replied.

Traldi went on to question the witness about Operation Corridor in the spring of 1992. He asked him about the rail connection in the strategically important area of Doboje, which Kelecevic agreed had been "a lifeline" in terms of supplying his troops.

The prosecution told him that this train line had been used to take Muslim civilians from Bosanski Novi to Doboje in the summer of 1992.

"In the Doboje area the train was stopped, all the men of military age were taken off and they were sent back to [Bosanski] Novi and detained, right?" he asked.

"I don't know about that," the witness replied.

Traldi continued, "You testified earlier that this rail connection was a lifeline; you testified that the core command was informed about extraordinary events, including the transport of large numbers of non-Serbs to Prijedor. In that case, is it your evidence that people can be forced off a train in Doboje on a strategically important rail link, a lifeline for the corps, sent back through Banja Luka, through Prijedor, through Bosanski Novi, and the corps command can possibly be ignorant of that?"

"I did not say I didn't know about the transport," Kelecevic replied. "I didn't know these people returned to Bosanski Novi, I can really not say anything about it, I don't remember that."

"Sir, I'm going to just put to you that based on the importance that you testified this rail line had, your testimony in this respect is just not credible. Do you have any comment on that?" Traldi asked.

"The focus of my work was to prevent enemy forces from the north from cutting through the territory of Republika Srpska on the line from Derventa to Doboje," the witness replied. "I was concentrating on that. I'm not saying that what you're asking is not an important issue, but I was totally focused on other tasks."

Traldi went on to discuss a July 16, 1992 visit which Mladic and Kelecevic paid to the town of Odzak which had been taken by the Bosnian Serb army.

The witness said that destruction in the area had been caused by both sides in the war, since the Croat and Muslim forces had travelled through the region before it was occupied by his own troops.

The prosecutor read from an article from the Toronto Star newspaper dated June 18, 1992 which described refugees leaving the area by train, almost all of them "Slavic Muslims from the towns of Odzak and Modrica, which were shelled and burned in a fresh Serbian onslaught that began about two weeks ago".

"Were you aware when you and General Mladic visited that Odzak, among other areas in the corridor, had just been shelled and burned by the VRS and that thousands of non-Serbs were fleeing?" he asked.

The witness said he did not know who had been responsible for this destruction.

"The enemy forces could have fired on the area to destroy it as well," he said. "I do not deny that there was no destruction... but I also cannot say that it was done exclusively by the army of Republika Srpska."

Traldi later turned to events in Prijedor, focusing on operations to disarm Bosnian Muslims in Kozarac and other areas where hundreds of civilians were killed and their property destroyed.

The lawyer put it to the witness that the corps command had kept the main staff informed about preparations for these attacks.

Kelecovic said he could not confirm this as it had been his commander who was responsible for communicating with the main staff.

"I am not familiar with the contents of their discussions," he said, adding that "perhaps in such extraordinary circumstances he [Talic] didn't need to ask for approval. He was a very experienced commander, capable of self initiative and making decisions on his own... in any case I don't know".

"Mladic trusted him a lot, right?" Traldi asked.

"Yes," the witness replied.

"But as an expert commander whom General Mladic trusted, he would have obeyed the chain of command and kept the main staff in the loop on preparations for this operation," Traldi said.

"He should have. I can't say whether he did," the witness replied.

Later, the prosecution turned to conditions in prison camps in Prijedor. Traldi noted that units subordinate to the 1st Krajina Corps had taken 7,000 prisoners to the Omarska camp.

The witness said he had not known that prisoners were abused and killed there in the summer of 1992.

"So, again, your view as an excellent chief-of-staff is that you have no idea what conditions the 7,000 prisoners taken by your corps were being held in, is that right?" he asked.

The witness said that the detainees had been the responsibility of the civilian authorities.

"If these prisoners had been of any security interest, then you would have kept an eye on them, you would have wanted to know what they said during interrogations, you would have wanted to ensure that the camps were guarded so they couldn't get out, right?" Traldi said.

Kelecovic said he had no involvement in this process.

"Let me put it to you very simply. The only way that you could sit there today and suggest that you didn't know and you weren't interested in what they were being questioned about... [is that] these prisoners were picked up non-selectively, were not of any security interest and so the VRS after rounding them up could just hand them over to the police who were securing Omarska and Keraterm, right?"

The witness said that Talic had been kept informed about the prisoners by his subordinates, and he had had no reason to check up on his commander.

He later said that the role of VRS units consisted only of capturing armed men and handing them over to the civilian authorities.

Further questioned by presiding Judge Alphonse Orié about whether these men had the status of prisoners of war, Kelecovic said he could not be sure that they had been combatants.

"I can't tell you if they were soldiers or not. We would have to check registers and documents," he added. "I can't say whether specific cases and people were civilians or soldiers."

"You can't tell us if the prisoners were soldiers or not. You also don't know if they were civilians who didn't give up arms," Traldi said. "You don't know, because they were picked up non-selectively, civilians detained alongside what Muslim formations existed in Prijedor, right?"

The witness replied that it had not been possible to establish the status of detainees straight away. "I can't tell you now whether anyone in particular was a civilian or not," he added.

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". 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.

The Mladic case will now begin its summer recess.

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