

New Sarajevo Siege Trial

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Dragomir Milosevic who commanded the Bosnian Serb Sarajevo Romanija Corps has gone on trial on charges relating to the siege of Sarajevo.

The trial of a general in charge of Bosnian Serb forces that besieged Sarajevo during the 1992-95 Bosnian war began this week in The Hague.

Two months after Bosnian Serb General Stanislav Galic was given a life sentence on appeal for his role in the campaign in the Bosnian capital from September 1992 to August 1994, his deputy commander and successor, General Dragomir Milosevic, stands in the dock on similar charges.

Milosevic, the former commander of the Bosnian Serb Sarajevo Romanija Corps, is charged with seven counts of crimes against humanity and violations of laws and customs of war for the artillery and sniper attacks which terrorised the inhabitants of Sarajevo from August 1994 until November 1995.

He surrendered to the tribunal in December 2004 and pleaded not guilty to all charges.

During the three-year siege, the Bosnian Serb Army killed and wounded thousands of civilians. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights estimated that 11,700 people were killed, including 1,500 children.

The Galic judgment found that civilians were targeted as they carried out daily activities like tending vegetable plots, shopping for food or walking with friends. Some victims were even injured and killed in the shelter of their own homes, as gunfire penetrated the windows.

According to the indictment against Milosevic, the sustained attack on Sarajevo civilians was deliberate, indiscriminate and excessive with little military advantage anticipated. "These attacks were designated to keep the inhabitants in a constant state of terror," it says.

In his opening statement this week, prosecutor Alex Whiting said that for the 15 months that Milosevic commanded the Romanija Corps, civilians in Sarajevo were exposed to "brutal shelling from superior military forces".

"The indiscriminate and deliberate shelling of civilians from Sarajevo Romanija Corps was intended to gain military advantage over the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, ABiH. They wanted to force them to capitulate," said Whiting.

The prosecutor claimed that during his time as commander, Milosevic had almost 18,000 troops under his control and deployed them with a goal of "spreading terror among people of Sarajevo".

"Every day for the people of Sarajevo was a matter of life and death. They were faced with a choice to die of the cold or to expose themselves to sniper fire in the search for bread," said Whiting.

He told the judges that the prosecutor would present evidence that Milosevic gave an order on January 19, 1995 to provide the transport that brought snipers to Sarajevo.

The second prosecutor in this case, Stefan Waespi, said that Milosevic took disciplinary action against deserters but never did anything to punish those responsible for sniper attacks against civilians.

“General Milosevic continued the terror campaign on Sarajevo begun by his predecessor General Galic. We believe that General Milosevic is guilty [of] all charges against him,” said Waespi.

The trial chamber has allowed the prosecution to call no more than 104 witnesses. It has given them 180 hours to present those witnesses, with the defence being given the same amount of time for cross-examination. This means the prosecution case will end by the beginning of April 2007.

The defence has been given 45 days to present its case, and the trial chamber has decreed that the trial must be finished by mid July.

Presiding judge Patrick Robinson said this is a straightforward case and could therefore be finished on time.

It is unclear if the Galic sentence will be an important precedent, but it's certain that the prosecutor will present similar evidence.

The first witness will testify on January 15.

Aleksandar Roknic is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

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