

## **Oric**

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Former Srebrenica fighter plays down accused's command role.

The latest witness to speak in defence of former Srebrenica commander Naser Oric has told judges that far from being a military leader in the usual sense of the word, Oric was more like "the first among equals" during the war in Bosnia,

Oric is charged with responsibility for war crimes in and around the eastern Bosnian town of Srebrenica between May 1992 and March 1993, including murders and abuse of prisoners and the destruction of nearby Serb villages. Prosecutors say he was responsible for such crimes partly by virtue of the authority that he wielded over local Muslim fighters.

Defence lawyers will be hoping that testimony like that provided by Suad Smijlovic – a policeman who fought alongside Oric during the war – will cast doubt over such claims.

Smijlovic – along with another witness called this week, former Venezuelan diplomat Diego Enrique Arria – also spoke of the horrific conditions in Srebrenica during the long period in which it was encircled by Serb forces.

Oric's lawyers have argued that their client's actions during the war have to be seen in the context of the dire situation in Srebrenica.

Smijlovic told the court that in the early days of the Bosnian conflict, several armed groups of local men operated in the area - one of which he led himself and one of which was loyal to Oric.

In May 1992, he said, by which point Srebrenica had been under bombardment for several months, a meeting was held and the various leaders decided that they ought to "lend one another a hand". Oric was selected as the individual best-placed to coordinate their efforts.

Even after that, however, Smijlovic said that all major questions were put to a vote, with Oric having little executive power. "It was said that [he] was only the first among equals," he said, "and that he was not able to take any decisions on his own."

Smijlovic told judges that Srebrenica was under constant attack from Serb forces, who used artillery, air strikes and mortars. Since Srebrenica's hospital was destroyed, he said, his own home was turned into a makeshift infirmary. Desks from a nearby school were used as operating tables.

The witness added that Muslim villages in the surrounding area were unable to communicate with each other because of ambushes set up by the Serb army. He also said that local residents were aware of the existence of a number of prison camps nearby, where many of their number had lost their lives.

The sense of fear in the town was heightened, Smijlovic said, by other news about what was happening in the surrounding area. He recalled having heard about a group of "volunteers" from Serbia who were

helping local Serbs to ethnically cleanse Muslims, and whose “one and only purpose was to kill”.

In September 1992, he added, a girl was brought into the town having apparently survived a mass killing of some 1,000 Muslims in nearby Tegere. The Serb army, he said, had encircled the area and slaughtered anyone they found alive. Young women and girls were apparently taken into nearby woods to be raped and murdered.

Those who brought the surviving girl into Srebrenica, Smijlovic said, reported that when they arrived in Tegere they had seen the bodies of a number of children, some of whom appeared to have been shot from behind and one of whom had been dismembered.

“Old people, whoever wore jewellery, their fingers had been cut off,” he said. “The people in the area of Tegere were simply massacred.”

Earlier in the week, Arria, Venezuela’s former ambassador to the United Nations, painted an equally bleak picture of life in Srebrenica. When he visited the town briefly in March 1993, after it was declared part of a United Nations “safe area”, Arria said that “it was a picture of total devastation and sadness”.

“People were really desperate,” he added.

He recalled seeing people living in the streets and said that since the besieging Serb army prevented medical help from getting through, the town had only one doctor. There was no real clinic, he said, and patients were treated on a local football pitch.

Arria was also scathing of the international community’s involvement in the conflict in Bosnia and accused peacekeeping forces in the Srebrenica area, who he claimed had sided with the Serbs, of allowing a “slow motion genocide” to take place.

It became clear from an early stage, he said, “that the international community would not raise a finger to help them [the Bosnian Muslims] and would not allow them to defend themselves”.

Prosecutor Patricia Sellers demanded to know whether Arria’s visit to Srebrenica – which lasted only one day – was really enough to get a full picture of the situation in the area.

The witness said he had been asked the same question when testifying previously in the trial of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, and would give her the same answer that he had given then.

“It didn’t take but a few hours to see human misery and destruction. You didn’t have to live with it,” was his reply. “On the contrary, it seems that the UN people who lived with it for a long time didn’t report it.”

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