

## **Oric**

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By Merdijana Sadovic in The Hague (TU No 403, 22-Apr-05)

Ham radio operator Ibrahim Becirovic, appearing under subpoena, was brought to The Hague to confirm the authenticity of reports that he sent to the Bosnian media in 1992 and 1993 about attacks by Muslim forces on Serb villages in the Srebrenica enclave.

The indictment alleges that, as the most senior military commander in the area, Oric was responsible for the destruction and looting of these villages, as well as the mistreatment and murders of Serb prisoners in Srebrenica itself.

Prosecutors also appeared to hope that the witness' testimony would show that Oric had the means to report war crimes committed by men under his command to his superiors outside the enclave, but never did so.

Oric is charged with responsibility for the crimes in question largely on the grounds that he failed either to prevent them or to take appropriate steps to punish the perpetrators afterwards.

But in the event, the focus of Becirovic's testimony turned to the key question of Oric's position in the military hierarchy in Srebrenica, with the witness insisting that in fact no such regulated command structure existed.

Despite having been forced to testify against his will, Becirovic seemed relaxed in court as he spoke about his position as a radio operator for the Srebrenica war presidency, the highest civilian authority in the area at the time.

His role, he said, largely involved broadcasting messages – including calls for food and medicine – from the war presidency to the Bosnian government, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN military command in Bosnia and even the UN Security Council.

He also helped set up conversations between people in Srebrenica and their relatives who had fled the enclave. And he sent reports to Sarajevo regarding attacks on nearby Serb villages, to be published in the local media.

A number of examples of these reports were entered into evidence by prosecutor Joanne Richardson, after the witness confirmed that he had sent them himself.

He said the bulletins were usually published in the media in their original form.

Becirovic, who defended the attacks as “the only way for the people in Srebrenica to obtain the food and weapons they desperately needed”, said he gathered information on them afterwards by going to the local hospital and interviewing those who had been wounded.

Prosecutors went on to ask the witness whether he had ever passed on messages from the local military forces.

A previous prosecution witness - Izo Tankic, who worked as a judge in Tuzla - told judges last month that the public prosecutor in Srebrenica sometimes used the radio to inform officials in Tuzla of serious crimes that occurred in the enclave. But he told the court that no reports of war crimes had been received in this way.

However, when prosecutors asked Becirovic whether he had ever come into contact with military commanders in Srebrenica, his testimony set off on a different - and possibly unwelcome - tangent.

"At the time I didn't even think there were persons who could be referred to as commanders," he told the court.

"In my view, there were only poorly organised armed groups who rallied around certain men from their local communes."

Prosecutors claim Oric took on a senior command position in Srebrenica at a meeting in May 1992, where he was appointed head of the local Territorial Defence, TO.

But Becirovic's testimony dovetails with that provided by three previous key Bosnian Muslim witnesses. They have argued that the armed forces in Srebrenica at the time were in fact nothing more than a bunch of ad hoc groups gathered around individual commanders, and that Oric was not in overall control.

As an example of what the situation was like with regard to the military hierarchy in Srebrenica, Becirovic discussed the behaviour of local commander Hakija Meholjic, who testified recently that he had never accepted Oric as his superior.

"Hakija would send his men to help out other units only if he wanted to," Becirovic confirmed.

"It was the same with other local commanders - nobody had an obligation to go and help. That's why I'm saying [the TO] was not an organised structure that could coordinate the activities of armed groups that existed in Srebrenica."

Becirovic acknowledged that he had heard about the May 1992 meeting. But he said the decision that was taken there to put various armed groups under Oric's command never actually came into effect.

After two full days of questioning and with no sign of the witness' testimony coming to an end, Presiding Judge Carmel Agius appeared unimpressed, asking Richardson, "I have been thinking for [the last] two days, what are you seeking to prove with this gentleman's testimony?"

Richardson promised to "revisit" her list of questions and "try to condense it down".

Becirovic's testimony will continue next week.

Merdijana Sadovic is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

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