

Out of Control Mujahedin Claims

Author: [Merdijana Sadović](#)

New testimony builds on defence claims that mujahedin operated independently of Bosnian government forces.

Witnesses testifying at the trial of former Bosnian army commanders Enver Hadzihasanovic and Amir Kubura told judges this week that foreign mujahedin fighters, who at first presented themselves as aid workers, were a source of trouble for government troops.

They also confirmed early witness testimonies to the effect that mujahedin took civilian prisoners in the village of Miletici on the same day that four surrendered Croat fighters were apparently murdered there.

Hadzihasanovic and Kubura are charged jointly with command responsibility for murder and mistreatment of non-Muslim civilians and combatants, and the plundering and destruction of their homes, in central Bosnia in 1993. This includes the alleged massacre of four Croat soldiers in Miletici on April 24 that year.

Prosecutors say the defendants' subordinates – who allegedly included mujahedin – carried out the crimes listed in the indictment, and they failed to take measures to prevent them from doing so or to punish them afterwards.

But the testimony heard from two members of Hadzihasanovic's Third Corps this week builds on defence claims that the mujahedin in fact operated independently of government forces, who were unable to control them.

Fahir Candzic, who was commander of an army unit based in the village of Mehurici during the time period in question, told the court he didn't feel comfortable around mujahedin fighters. He said they had first arrived in Mehurici towards the end of the summer of 1992 and had initially presented themselves as humanitarian workers. They initially took up residence in the village primary school used by his own detachment, moving into the floor above.

"We didn't feel safe with these foreigners so close to us," Candzic told judges. "I didn't know who these people were, where they came from, or why they were there. I didn't feel comfortable in their presence."

Candzic said he had been told that the men, at first simply referred to by the villagers as "Arabs", were supposed to provide food and clothing for the local population.

It is part of the defence case that the mujahedin managed to win over parts of the local population by handing out supplies. Lawyers for Hadzihasanovic and Kubura say it subsequently became difficult for the army to square up to the mujahedin because they risked splitting the loyalties of the local population in the process.

Candzic said the mujahedin later expanded their activities and began recruiting followers, to whom they even gave a limited number of weapons.

Also giving evidence for the defence case this week was Hamid Suljic, a former operations officer in the Mehurici army detachment and a Muslim resident of Miletici.

The witness told the court that he was returning home from the front line on the day of the alleged massacre in his village when he encountered a column of civilians being escorted by mujahedin fighters.

The fighters, who wore masks and uniforms without insignia and addressed each other in Arabic, were the only soldiers he saw near Miletici that day.

Suljic said he recognised his father and two other relatives in the group of detainees, along with many of his Croat neighbours. His father was bleeding and his hands were tied, but when the witness tried to approach the mujahedin to talk to them, he was pushed away.

The witness then said that he had gone back to his command post in Mehurici and a lengthy process of negotiations with the mujahedin to secure the civilians' release began. His evidence confirms earlier testimony to the effect that the army was forced to negotiate with the mujahedin to free the prisoners from Miletici, which suggests that the mujahedin were not under army control.

Suljic also confirmed that while the three Muslim detainees were freed almost immediately, it took longer for the mujahedin to give up the rest of the group.

The witness said that he was never able to persuade his father to tell him what happened in Miletici when the mujahedin arrived.

"He never talked about that day," Suljic told the court, "he only said, 'Son, something evil happened and I couldn't help those people'."

He said a joint commission was later set up to try to establish what had occurred in Miletici. He also said he and his men were ordered to guard the Croat houses in the village to prevent them from being looted.

Suljic told judges that his family had always been very close to their Croat neighbours. "We celebrated our holidays together, attended weddings and funerals together - we participated in every aspect of each others' life," he told the court.

Miletici's former Croats residents still return to their old homes from time to time, the witness said.

"They visit their properties and their land, and when they come, they visit us. They don't blame us for what happened in Miletici, they know someone else did it," he told the court. "We are on the same terms as we were before the war - we respect them, they respect us."

The trial continues next week.

Merdijana Sadovic is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

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