

Petkovic Trial Hears of Growing Ethnic Divisions in Konjic

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Defence claims developments there in 1993 key to understanding conflict between HVO and Bosnian army.

A former Croatian Defence Council, HVO, soldier this week told the Hague tribunal trial of wartime Bosnian Croat official Milivoj Petkovic this week of how ethnic divisions widened in the municipality of Konjic during 1992.

Petkovic is on trial along with five other high-ranking Bosnian Croat officials: Jadranko Prlic, Bruno Stojic, Slobodan Praljak, Valentin Coric and Berislav Pusic.

The six are accused of responsibility for the expulsion, rape, torture and murder of Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and other non-Croats between late 1991 and early 1994, as part of an alleged plan to ethnically cleanse parts of Bosnia in order to later join them to a so-called Greater Croatia.

Petkovic, former military commander of the HVO, in the breakaway Croatian republic of Herceg-Bosna, faces charges of command responsibility for war crimes committed during 1992 and 1993 in south-western and central Bosnia.

The indictment concentrates on crimes against humanity committed in the municipalities of Prozor, Gornji Vakuf, Jablanica, Mostar, Ljubuski, Stolac, Capljina and Vares.

Although the municipality of Konjic has not been included in the indictment against the six former Bosnian Croat leaders, the defence claims that what happened in the area between March and April of 1993 is of key importance to understanding the conflict between the HVO, and the Army of Bosnia and Hercegovina, ABiH.

The defence witness, a former member of the Konjic-based HVO Herceg Stjepan brigade, gave testimony under measures of identity and face protection.

Petkovic's defence tried to point out the importance of the town of Konjic and its position alongside the Sarajevo - Mostar highway, which connects Bosnia to the Adriatic coast.

“The city of Konjic was particularly important in the defence plans of the former Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) since a military installation belonging to the JNA was located near the city. It was at Konjic that an ammunition factory - as well as a high security bunker, known as ARK, for top officials - were located,” said the witness.

“The bunker was built so that it could house the supreme leadership of the former JNA, should the need ever arise. In 1992, it was connected to the liaison centre and the Igman ammunition factory.”

The witness claimed that ARK “was set up in such a way that 150 individuals could live inside it and not

come out for over a year. It was a multi-story building dug into a hill, just like the ammunition factory on the site”.

The witness then described how the building was rescued, despite its destruction having been ordered by the then commander of the seventh army district of the JNA, Milutin Kokanjac.

Asked by defence lawyer Vesna Alaburic why the JNA would want

the building torn down, the witness answered, “I think it was their intent to destroy all buildings of great importance to them.

“The JNA order said that in case ARK could not be kept, it should be destroyed. The whole building was connected to an ammunitions warehouse and an explosive device located on the other side of the hill.”

The witness pointed out that the JNA “was not able to implement these plans because there was a civilian, Rajko, working as a ballistics assistant at the plant, who was a Croat. As the army was leaving, he cut the connecting bomb wires with his own teeth”.

The witness said that this building had been of strategic importance as it was planned that it should host the general staff of the supreme command of the ABiH from Sarajevo, which was under siege.

“The building was of strategic interest to the ABiH general staff, as throughout 1992 members of the military leadership, led by Vehbija Karic, would come and visit the building. He was the one who tried to organise the transfer of the supreme command from Sarajevo to the ARK facility,” said the witness, also noting that then president Alija Izetbegovic visited the facility on several occasions.

The witness specified that he was referring to a period in April and May of 1992, “It was a time when war was brooding in Bosnia. The parties of the conflict at the time were the JNA with Serb volunteers and the territorial defence of the Muslim and Croat peoples.

“The conflict between Croats and Muslims in Konjic began on May 5, 1992, after a joint military action by Croats and Muslims in which we had together liberated the village of Bradina on Ivan Sedlo mountain. This action helped us open up a road toward Sarajevo. It was from then on that general staff members of the ABiH started coming to Konjic, and the situation of Croat-Muslim relations started changing.”

The defence also pointed out that there was a decision by the wartime presidency of Bosnia to have refugees coming back from Croatia into Bosnia recruited into the ABiH in those municipalities which were under ABiH control.

The witness claimed that this mobilisation was “carried out in secret, with no knowledge on part of the Croats, demonstrating that the ABiH obviously had some secret intentions”.

ABiH recruits in Konjic at that time included, according to the witness, 16 year-olds who joined local “extremists” in refusing to cooperate with the Croats.

As an example, the witness mentioned an ABiH unit named "Muderiz" and led by local imam Nezim Halilovic. According to the witness, it was the task of these "extremists" to cause conflict in Konjic.

The witness said that Konjic Croats were scared because the Muslims who were evicted from their homes elsewhere were "much more extreme than indigenous Muslims".

According to the witness, "There were major differences between the domestic Muslims and those that came from elsewhere. With the first we held our defence together, whereas the latter moved into Serb property and formed their own units."

The presiding judge, Jean-Claude Antonetti, intervened by asking that, as the witness said that "there were extremists in the ABiH", did he think that there were "extremists in HVO lines?"

"I cannot say if there were any or not, but where I was active, there were none," answered the witness.

The trial continues next week.

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