

Praljak Claims Croats Never Sought Bosnia Partition

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Defendant says they just wanted to prevent the Islamisation of the country.

Former Bosnian Croat general Slobodan Praljak denied at the Hague war crimes tribunal this week that there was ever a plan to annex the ethnic Croat-inhabited parts of Bosnia.

Praljak is indicted for war crimes along with other five high-ranking Bosnian Croat officials - Jadranko Prlic, Bruno Stolic, Milivoj Petkovic, Valentin Coric and Berislav Pusic. The six are accused of responsibility for the expulsion, rape, torture and murder of 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 Greater Croatia.

According to the indictment, Praljak served during the 1991-95 Bosnian war as Croatia's liaison to the government and armed forces of the Bosnian Croats' self-proclaimed state of Herceg-Bosna, HVO, acting as a conduit for instructions from the then Croatian president Franjo Tudjman and other officials.

The prosecution's case includes Croatian transcripts supporting its thesis of the existence of territorial intentions of the state of Croatia toward Bosnia, specifically Zagreb's alleged aim of annexing parts of Bosnia by restoring the borders of the 1939-1941 Croat Banovina, a sub-state of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia that unified Croat-inhabited areas of the country.

But Praljak in his defence denied the existence of a separatist plan and said Bosnia was "supposed to remain independent and undivided".

"Since the beginning of the conflict between the Croats and the Muslims, the position of all Croat structures of government - from parliament, government and President Tudjman to the people and the army - regarding the destiny of Bosnia and Hercegovina was clear enough," Praljak said.

This was true "despite all difficulties of the ever-changing policy by [former Bosnian president] Alija Izetbegovic and the international community, despite the mujahedin and the aggression against Croats by the army of Bosnia and Hercegovina", he added, referring to Arab Muslim volunteers who fought at the side of the Bosnian Muslims.

Praljak said that the "Croat Community of Herceg-Bosna was merely a temporary creation", whose aim was "to save lives and defend the equal rights for Croats in Bosnia and Hercegovina".

"Muslims started, in coffeehouses, massively and publicly saying that once the war with Serbs was over, a war with the Catholics [Croats] would come. They openly spoke of their wishes for a state whose majority would be Muslims," said Praljak.

In his cross-examination of the witness, Judge Jean-Claude Antonetti referred to the transcripts of secret meetings of the Croat leadership from July 17 and September 11, 1992, where Tudjman "said he would insist that the regions which belonged to the Croat Banovina become part of the Croatian state, both demographically and geo-politically".

"General Praljak, how do you comment these claims?" asked the judge.

"Tudjman thought of those parts of the Banovina where Croats were the demographic majority. Banovina was a denominator for the protection of the Croat people," answered Praljak.

Judge Antonetti said that "from the transcript, one may conclude that Tudjman was afraid of an Islamic state in Bosnia and Hercegovina" and asked "whether this represented a risk for Tudjman?"

"Tudjman was justifiably scared, as the SDA (the main Muslim political party) was composed mostly of people who had spent many years in prison," Praljak said.

"These are people who were imprisoned for political ideas and you could never be sure that they would give up these ideas. They never denied their political platform based on the [Izetbegovic's] Islamic Declaration. In the end, many influential people in the international community were also afraid of that same thing."

He went on to present his claims of the fear in the West of a possible Islamisation in Bosnia.

"As they were scared," said Praljak, "they simultaneously pushed Tudjman and Croatia in a confederal relation with 2,400,000 Muslims in Bosnia and Hercegovina. The reason for that was that they were afraid that the Muslims would get their Islamic state influenced by Islamic countries such as Iraq or Saudi Arabia. Then they left it up to the Croats....and we were afraid too. It is a number far too large, more than 50 per cent of Bosnia's population."

Swiss judge Stephan Trechsel pointed out a transcript from 1993 where Tudjman "spoke of the mujahedin and claimed that they numbered between 1,000 and 1,300 and that they came from the Sudan, from Afghanistan and Iran".

"While you were HVO commander, did you receive intelligence data confirming that your opponent had among its lines more than 1,300 foreign fighters, mujahedin, including local residents?" asked the judge.

"Yes, we were fully aware of that and based on what I knew, I responsibly claim that the number of mujahedin was larger than 5,000 at the time. They had public and covert support from Alija Izetbegovic, his generals and advisors," answered Praljak.

Judge Arpad Prandler asked about Praljak's position on Tudjman's claim that "there were four million Turkish citizens ready to depart for BiH".

"Honestly, I am stunned. I've never heard of such a claim. I wish to say that I am sure that this number is exaggerated as I know enough about the former Yugoslavia and the area's history. This number, in my opinion, is just a part of the story on the 'Muslim threat' and cannot

thus be supported by any facts," He said.

"Your honour, my position is the exact opposite: these are truthful facts you can check and the number is not an exaggeration," answered Praljak.

Asked by Judge Antonetti to explain why Izetbegovic refused to sign an agreement with Tudjman on the area of Bosanska Posavina, which was obviously very important, Praljak said that Izetbegovic "hoped that he would sign an agreement with the Serbs to damage the Croats".

"He wanted to play all possible sides, because he was shifty. He'd sit anywhere until he got a match, and he always tried to strike a deal with the stronger side, so if the Serbs were not doing what they had been doing, he would have made a deal with them against the Croats," he said.

Continuing his examination, Judge Antonetti pointed out a document which claims that Praljak had ordered "no mercy toward anyone". According to the indictment, after one such order, the HVO attacked the village of Stupni Do on October 23, 1993 and killed some 37 Bosnian Muslim men, women and children. During an attack on the village of Ahmici in central Bosnia, also in 1993, more than 100 civilians were murdered and their property destroyed and ransacked.

Praljak replied that the "no mercy" statement referred to the disorder in the HVO units in Vares which was "prevalent at the time", not to attitudes towards Muslim civilians. He said he had never ordered HVO units in the Vares area to treat people without mercy.

When asked by Judge Antonetti "whether the Croatian government had met and discussed the events in the villages of Stupni Do and Ahmici", Praljak said that "this was a topic of unlimited discussion and that, unfortunately, the least had been done to ensure a thorough

investigation on the ground".

Judge Antonetti referred to a transcript in which "Tudjman speaks of the crimes at Ahmici and Stupni Do and says 'horrible', but what I want to know is the part that follows, where Tudjman speaks of 'them' and says that 'they put on the black uniforms together with the English and filmed this' - could you explain this part, General Praljak?"

"First he said 'horrible', as he thought that what had happened was horrible, and second - I do not wish to discuss legal problems, but I claim that what we knew was that various Muslim units that were acting under Alija Izetbegovic's orders, such as the Seve (Larks) and the

Crni Labudovi (Black Swans), were aided by various sides from abroad and had committed crimes in a way similar to secret services, in order to help fabricate stories," Praljak said.

He went on to explain that Tudjman "was desperate as he didn't understand who was setting him up, and why".

Praljak said that Tudjman "stuck to elementary human convictions" because "he would not sign an agreement on a protected area and then let someone do whatever they felt like doing, and he would not allow genocide, expulsion and ethnic cleansing".

He said that Tudjman knew "the key issue was where you defended your borders".

"America is currently defending its borders in Iraq and Afghanistan, or may defend them in North Korea, if they feel the threat," he said, only to be interrupted by Judge Antonetti's swift interjection.

"You've left the frame of the question by stating the USA example, please refrain from such comments", the judge cautioned.

The trial continues next week.

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