

Praljak Defends Herceg-Bosna

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He also denies there was any political deal between leaders to carve up Bosnia.

Slobodan Praljak, one of the key players in the wartime breakaway Croatian Republic of Herceg-Bosna, told the Hague tribunal this week that this entity was established in Bosnia in order to stop Croats being killed.

The former Croatian assistant defence minister, who is conducting his own defence, said that such protection was necessary largely due to what he said was the failure of the late Bosnian president Alija Izetbegovic to recognise the threat posed by the Serbs and prepare for conflict.

“I want to use this book *Bio Sam Alijin Diplomata (I Was Aljia's Diplomat)*, authored by [Bosnian philosopher and historian] Muhamed Filipovic to show what a man Izetbegovic was,” said Praljak.

“If you read this book, it'll be crystal clear to you why Herceg-Bosna had to be created. Izetbegovic did nothing to protect us [or] to stop the Croats from being killed. He did nothing to prepare for war.”

The former Croatian army officer went on to say Izetbegovic was a “man who wasn't smart” and “could not be trusted”.

“Even if one had struck a deal with him, and with the international community, he would simply ignore the deal after consulting his colleagues,” said Praljak, referring to the Bosnian president's inner circle. “He tended to insult other people, and understood nothing of democracy.

“Alija Izetbegovic didn't know how to do politics. For example, he naively believed the JNA (Yugoslav People's Army) was a friendly army which would protect us all. He often took the wrong stance.

“These stances were not his, but were created by his environment, his colleagues, members of the Young Muslim movement. That is what a Bosniak intellectual claims, and I'm only using the claims from his book.”

Praljak is indicted for war crimes along with fellow Bosnian Croats 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, committed 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, 64, served during the Bosnian war as Croatia's liaison to Herceg-Bosna's Croatian Council of Defence, HVO, government and armed forces. He acted as a conduit for communications and instructions from the late Croatian president Franjo Tudjman and other senior Croat officials, while also reporting back to Zagreb on developments in Bosnia, it says.

During the war, Praljak went by the codename “Brada” on account of his full beard, and is identified as such in several witness accounts and court documents.

The indictment states that through his various positions and functions, Praljak exercised control over the HVO armed forces, and was responsible for their logistics, organisation, planning, training, deployment, as well as strategic and combat orders.

This week, Praljak told the court about his role during the war, saying that he came to Bosnia of his own free will, and was not acting upon orders of Tudjman.

He said that the Bosnian army continuously received logistical assistance and support from Croatia throughout the 1992-1995 war, with aid regularly allowed to travel through Herceg-Bosna territory.

He cited the example of the northwestern Bosnian town of Bihac, which was under siege by Bosnian Serb forces for three years, until Croatia's Operation Storm military offensive gave Bosnian Muslims an opening to break the siege in the summer of 1995.

"Had there been no Croatian aid in early fall 1995, Bihac would have lived the destiny of Srebrenica," said Praljak.

In support of his testimony, the accused also submitted to the court documents from various sources relating to the medical treatment in Croatia of combatants and civilians from Bosnia.

Praljak said that a total of 10,623 wounded Bosnian Muslims – including both Bosnian army soldiers and civilians – were transported over the territory of Herceg-Bosna and treated for free in various hospitals throughout Croatia. They were never treated as prisoners, he added.

"Once treated, they were free to go wherever they wanted, even to the front lines," said Praljak.

When speaking of the wave of refugees leaving Bosnia during the war for other countries, Praljak suggested that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, was actually to blame for this exodus.

"In April 1994, UNHCR envoys started spreading panic among Bosnian refugees and lying, I repeat, lying to them that in Croatia, they would lose their [refugee status]," he said.

"Yes, they did it, not Croatia, and if you're speaking of a criminal enterprise and of ethnic cleansing, then the UNHCR should be facing trial, not Croatia.

"The government of Bosnia and Hercegovina sent official communiques to the Croatian government to express its disapproval of the UNHCR depopulation policy. The Bosnian government wished to prevent mass emigration of refugees into third countries."

When Judge Jean-Claude Antonetti asked Praljak why he thought the UNHCR carried out such a policy, the defendant replied, "I guess there must have been political intent to disperse the Bosniaks in the world.

“Just look at how many of them now live in the USA or elsewhere and are raising a second generation of kids. Do you know [that according to] official data, there are more than 200,000 Muslims that never returned to Republika Srpska, and almost 200,000 Croats?”

The defendant also said that contrary to popular belief, there was never any agreement between Tudjman and the late Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic to carve up Bosnia between Serbia and Croatia.

The current Croatian president Stjepan Mesic testified during the tribunal trial of Milosevic in October 2002, saying that Tudjman had told him that in a meeting with Milosevic, on March 25, 1991, they had agreed to divide Bosnia between their two states.

“All those who claim that there was an agreement are lying, including Stipe Mesic,” said Praljak.

“Why didn’t Mesic air these claims earlier, while Tudjman was still alive? This is all just political payback.”

According to the defendant, Milosevic and Tudjman had 40 further meetings.

“If they had agreed back then [during this early meeting], then why did they need to meet again and again?” he asked.

“I think that when two powerful men agree, there is no need for more meetings, but rather that the agreement should be implemented.”

At that point, Judge Jean-Claude Antonetti intervened and said that this was a hypothetical, personal opinion, and could not be considered part of the defendant’s testimony.

The trial continues next week.

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