

Racak Killings Controversy

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New evidence sheds light on Racak victims

New evidence published last week should finally put an end to a controversy surrounding the death of 45 Kosovo Albanians, whose bodies were found in the Kosovo village of Racak on 16 January 1999.

The horrific discovery shocked the world and triggered a chain of events that eventually resulted in NATO air strikes against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Standing over the pile of over 20 corpses found in a gully close to the village, William Walker, head of the then OSCE Verification Mission, qualified what had happened as a "massacre".

This prompted a vehement reaction from the Yugoslav authorities, which declared Walker "persona non grata" and asked him to leave the country immediately.

Louise Arbour, tribunal chief prosecutor at the time, was then turned back at the Yugoslav border because she didn't have a visa.

Under international pressure, the Belgrade authorities allowed a EU forensic team, made up of Finnish experts, to work with Yugoslav experts on an autopsy of the Racak victims on January 22 1999.

Finnish team leader Dr Helena Ranta, aware of the restrictions of her mandate, later refrained from describing the incident in Racak as a "massacre". This was seized by the Belgrade regime as evidence that a mass killing had not taken place.

But an article by three members of the Finnish team in the journal *Forensic Science International* (Volume 116, Issues 2-3, 15 February 2001) explained that they had been mandated to determine only the cause and manner of death.

"The victims had sustained varying numbers of gunshot wounds, which were established to be the cause of death," they wrote. "The manner of death remained undetermined...(and was) impossible to verify. The Finnish team could not confirm that the victims were from Racak."

From the wounds suffered by the victims, there are strong suggestions that many were first beaten up, then shot in the chest or abdomen and finally in the head.

A declassified executive summary of a report by the Kosovo forensic team reveals for the first time that Finnish experts twice returned to Racak - in November 1999 and March 2000 - when the presence of KFOR troops allowed them to carry out crime-scene investigations. It said they found bullets and cartridge cases but were not able to match them because of the absence of weapons.

Dennis Milner, chief of the OTP Kosovo investigation, said he had no doubt a massacre had taken place in Racak and that he would be able to prove it in court.

"Our findings led us to the conclusion that the massacre had in fact taken place and that killings had been carried out by members of the Serbian security services," he said

"The evidence that was available to us was sufficient to justify an indictment against the people most responsible for those killings and for the policy of what appears to be state-sponsored terrorism.

"And the person who is ultimately responsible for those events, of course, is the person indicted... Slobodan Milosevic, the former president of the FRY."

Location: Kosovo

Focus: International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia

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