

REGIONAL REPORT: Lora Prison Killings Appeal

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Prosecution in trial of Croatian military policemen are appealing against their acquittal.

The Croatian supreme court is considering an appeal against the acquittal last month of eight military policemen accused of war crimes.

The policemen were accused of the murder and torture of ethnic Serbs inmates at Split's notorious Lora prison in 1992.

But after a five-month trial, the court decided on November 22 that there was no evidence to support the case, and released all eight men.

The prosecution now say the case should never have been heard in Split because of local hostility to the witnesses.

This trial was seen as a key test for Zagreb's ability to put Croatian war crimes suspects on trial. Since 2001, the country's courts have convicted 492 people of war crimes - all of them ethnic Serbs.

The Split proceedings were marred by controversy from the start. Judge Slavko Lozina opened the case in May by congratulating Croatia's national football squad, then allowed cheering from the witness box.

He was subsequently castigated by supreme court president Ivica Crnic for making a public appearance at a concert staged by extreme right-wing singer Marko Perkovic Thompson.

During the trial itself, Lozina said that the Lora prison murder of two Serb civilians - Gojko Bulovic and Nedan Knezevic - was not a war crime because Split was not at war in 1992.

He then made a speech to the court, in which he offered the opinion that it was a shame the Serbs that rebelled against Croatia had been granted blanket amnesties, while Croatian fighters faced Hague indictments.

During the trial, some 34 Serbs were called to give evidence, but 14 felt too frightened to make the journey to Split because of local animosity towards them. When they were belatedly given guarantees of protection by the Croatian government, they did not attend, mistakenly believing that the case would be postponed.

Among those who did not appear was Djordje Katic, a Serb from Split who claims that he was tortured in the prison in 1992.

That same year, after fleeing to Australia, he told Croatia's independent press about his sufferings in the jail, yet he said he was never called to give evidence at the trial.

Many observers have wondered why Lozina was chosen to preside over the trial in the first place. Previously, he had presided over proceedings against Split special police commander Vinko Budisa, who was charged with murder. However, the case collapsed when the key piece of evidence - a gun - went missing from the court.

Human rights groups have cried foul over the Lora acquittals. "This trial was irregular, as there was pressure put on the witnesses who appeared in the court," said Vojko Ivica, an observer from non-governmental organisation Altruist.

"Because of that many suddenly forgot events and those from Serbia did not even come."

And the controversy shows no sign of going away. Croatian president Stipe Mesic - while not commenting directly on this case - has said, "If someone is acquitted of a crime, and he is guilty of it, he will be extradited to The Hague tribunal."

The Hague itself will take no action until the end of the appeal being heard by the supreme courts. Prosecuting counsel Michael Squicciar is arguing that the trial should not have been held in Split because of threats made to witnesses.

"This trial should have been moved to some other town (where there was less hostility to the witnesses)," said professor of legal theory Nikola Viskovic, a prominent human rights activist. "I predicted that these proceedings would end shamefully, and in failure."

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