

Regional Report: Sandzak Trial Underway

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Long awaited trial of Serbs accused of murdering Muslims in a botched prisoner exchange operation begins.

Serbia's most high profile war crimes trial, involving the kidnap and murder of 17 Sandzak Muslims, opened last week amid a blaze of publicity.

The brutality of the allegations mean it is the most prominent of the four war crimes trials so far held in Belgrade.

Four Serbs - two of them on the run - are accused of kidnapping 17 Muslims from Sandzak, a mostly Muslim region in southern Serbia, during the Bosnian war.

Human rights groups say the plan was to use the hostages in a prisoner exchange to secure the release of Serb soldiers held by the Bosnian government army.

But when the deal fell through, the four men are alleged to have taken the Muslims to a bridge on the Drina at Visegrad, killed them, and tossed their bodies into the river.

Dragutin Dragicevic from Srebrenica and Djordje Sevic from Ruma are in the dock. The other two defendants - Milan Lukic and Oliver Krsmanovic - remain at large.

The Hague war crimes court has issued an arrest warrant for Lukic. And Belgrade media has reported that Krsmanovic is living freely in Visegrad.

All are charged with committing crimes against the civilian population.

Deputy District Prosecutor Vladan Vukcevic said the four men were part of a gang called Osvetnici (The Avengers).

Vukcevic claimed that the gang took the Muslims - 16 men and one woman - from a bus in the village of Mioce, on the road between Priboj and Sjeverin, on October 22, 1992.

They moved their captives onto Bosnian Serb territory, he said, taking them to a Visegrad hotel, Vilina Vlas, where they were "brutally physically tortured".

Later, the detainees were allegedly taken to the bank of the nearby Drina, where some were killed by shots from automatic weapons, and others by knives.

The prosecutor said the killing, and the hurling of the bodies into the river, was witnessed "by a large number of people [from the] Visegrad municipality".

Natasa Kandic, head of the Belgrade-based Humanitarian Law Fund, which has represented the families of the victims ever since, said the "prosecution came into possession of precious material evidence - photographs of the massacre of people in the Visegrad hotel, and witnesses who saw the tragedy".

This kidnapping in Sjeverin was just one in a series of similar abductions during 1992 and 1993.

Rights activists were quick to claim that the army and police were behind it in an attempt to get prisoners released from Bosnia.

"As it [the release of the hostages] did not happen, the kidnapped were killed," said Sefko Alomerovic, president of Helsinki Board for Human Rights in Sandzak.

As the trial opened, Dragicevic stood silent in the dock, refusing to answer questions.

Sevic, meanwhile, said that he "went to war as a patriot", joining the Serbian Radical Party, SRS, at the start of the Bosnian conflict.

He said the SRS organised a trip to Yugoslav army barracks near Loznica, where he and other volunteers were enrolled.

Sevic denied taking part in the crime, and said that he had not known in advance what the group - commanded by Lukic, the former commander of Visegrad's territorial defence force - was planning.

"Had I known what was going to happen, I would not have gone," he told the court.

Sevic said Lukic had stopped the bus carrying the Muslims near Mioce. "I think that he entered the bus with the rifle in his hand, and escorted the passengers out," he told the court.

"They were told to board a truck. I don't know exactly how many people were taken out of the bus."

According to a plan made by Lukic, Sevic was among those who guarded the vehicle while others took the passengers out.

Sevic said that when the hostages were taken to Visegrad, he had left the others and gone back to Ruma, without reporting to Lukic.

He said that between ten and twelve men took part in the action, and that they passed many police checkpoints on the border between Serbia and Serb-held Bosnia, but no one stopped them.

Sevic said he could tell from their clothes that the people on the bus were civilians, but he did not know their nationality. And that he only learned what had happened to them from the media some days later.

Witness Miloje Udovicic, owner of Zlatibor restaurant in Priboj, said he had towed a broken down truck in which the kidnapped Muslims were held.

He said the kidnapers had a black flag with the skull on it, which bore the words, "With faith in god, for king and homeland".

"At first I didn't know that there were living people in the truck. Only later, when we stopped at an incline, I noticed a hand of a man who waved at me, from under the cover," he said.

Udovicic said the kidnapers were happy. At the top of Bijelo Brdo mountain, they stopped, started shooting in the air and singing the words, "I am a Chetnik (Serb nationalist group) from head to toe."

He said he had heard about the kidnapped people's fate only when he came home. Asked by the lawyers of the accused why he didn't report the case to the police, Udovicic said that that he was scared. He said it "was the time when those things could not be spoken about. I have not discussed it. Had I done so, maybe I would not be here now."

Sevic told the court that after ten days in Ruma he went back to Bosnia "to defend the Serb people" - journeying to the Sarajevo front line where he remained for just over a week.

He had volunteered because the army had turned him down, ruling in 1990 that he was "an emotionally undeveloped person", he said. His defence produced a Ruma municipality document testifying to his condition.

Lawyers of the victims' families say they fear for their lives. The prosecutor said that they will receive police protection.

Dragoljub Todorovic, a lawyer for the victims' families, said one witness is under police protection because she saw the kidnapped people being tortured and killed.

The judges said her testimony will be given in closed session because of fears that it might provoke supporters of the accused.

The trial continues.

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