

REPORT: Milosevic Accused of 'Savagery'

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Historic trial of Slobodan Milosevic begins with the prosecution describing his alleged crimes as "medieval savagery".

The chief prosecutor of the Yugoslav war crimes tribunal today launched the first trial of a head of state for genocide and crimes against humanity, saying it would be a powerful demonstration that "no one is above the law" or beyond the reach of justice.

In the opening proceedings of the trial of Slobodan Milosevic, a case covering the conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, Carla del Ponte promised to provide a "full picture" of "medieval savagery and a calculated cruelty ... far beyond the bounds of legitimate warfare".

With a pale Milosevic under guard and glaring from the defendant's bench, the prosecution laid out the heart of its case, charging the former Serbian leader with playing the central role in a "joint criminal enterprise" to plan and implement a policy of ethnic cleansing.

Warning that the case will "challenge the very capacity of a modern criminal court to address crimes which extend so far in time and place", the prosecution detailed a Mafia-like web of Serbian military and paramilitary forces, with Milosevic at its centre.

In his opening presentation, chief trial lawyer for the prosecution, Geoffrey Nice, outlined a summary of Milosevic's rise to power, "exercised without accountability, responsibility or morality", through the Croatian rebellion, the Bosnian war and the expulsion of Albanians from Kosovo.

Drawing on internal Serbian documents, radio intercepts, documentary clips and other evidence, the prosecution detailed Milosevic's control over Serbian military and paramilitary formations throughout the territory of the former Yugoslavia.

In some cases, this control was de jure, direct and legally recognised, due to his political position, such as through presidential control of the Serbian interior ministry police and ministry of defense. In other cases, especially 1991-1995, his control was de facto, through manipulation of the rump Yugoslav presidency and its authority over the Yugoslav National Army, or through patronage and direct political influence over client parties, such as the Croatian and Bosnian Serbs.

Milosevic is reported as "angry", in one document, that Croatian Serbs failed to consult him. Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, according to other evidence, often referred to Milosevic as "the boss".

Pre-trial wrangling between the prosecution and the trial judges had centred on whether the cases covering three wars over a decade were sufficiently part of a "single transaction", or common chain of events, to be joined. At the trial, the prosecution was in no doubt that, throughout, there was a sole aim - "to gain or regain control over territory ensuring the domination of Serbs through the forcible removal of non-Serbs".

The start of trial has predictably aroused huge international press interest. Rows of satellite transmission trucks hummed outside the tribunal building. Two hours before the opening, CNN and BBC reporters were already out in the morning chill, filing their first reports on the historic event.

Milosevic himself - this his fourth appearance before the court - entered calmly, briefcase in hand, distinctly waving with a rare smile towards the press gallery, and rising according to protocol with the entrance of presiding Judge Richard May and his co-jurists.

Insisting that he does not recognise the court, Milosevic continued to refuse legal representation. But he regularly took notes and at the morning break, hinting that he may be prepared to be more cooperative, passed critical comments on the prosecution's case to the "friends of the court" - the lawyers appointed by the judges to represent the defendant's interests - whose help the accused has so far rejected.

Speaking at a measured pace, Nice began his presentation of the detail of the case with some emotion, highlighting the massacre of 250 people at Vukovar, the burning to death of 45 at Visegrad, and the dropping down a well of eight women in Kosovo.

"Someone with greater ingenuity than myself," he said, could devise a phrase more appropriate than ethnic cleansing, which could "better describe the real horror implied than the understatement in the world 'cleansing'".

The aim of the case, said Nice, will be to expose the direct relationship between the perpetrators of killing and expulsions on the ground in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo and the paramount Serbian leader as a "criminal enterprise" whose "natural and foreseeable result" was genocide.

Yet the bulk of his long presentation was a potted history familiar to anyone who has followed the Yugoslav wars in detail - often highlighted with newsreel clips, some seen many times, such as Milosevic's speech at the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Polje, the Yugoslav Army's shelling of Dubrovnik, or columns of people filing out of Vukovar after its fall.

In the only light moment of the morning, the tribunal television monitors cut from images of that defining 1987 moment - the trim and thrusting Serbian leader reassuring local Kosovo Serbs that "No one shall beat you" - directly to a shot of the defendant himself in the dock.

Caught perhaps in an unguarded moment of reminiscence - perhaps even satisfaction - Milosevic hinted at a grin, and the 50 or so journalists covering the trial broke into laughter.

But otherwise he glared suspiciously at an obviously hostile press gallery, and some journalists here for the drama of the trial began to fidget at the glacial and already seemingly pedestrian pace of the proceedings.

Judge May praised Del Ponte for "pruning" the documents list from the 1,000 items which had been originally proposed. But in any event, as the day closed with the prosecution just getting into its introduction to Bosnia and Milosevic himself not uttering a word, it was easy to expect a very long and drawn-out affair.

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