

Second Death In The Scheveningen Prison

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Tribunal Update 87: Last Week in The Hague

"The accused Dr. Milan Kovacevic passed away in his cell at the UN Detention Unit between 9 and 9.30 a.m. approximately" - the Registry of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia announced on Saturday 1 August. According to the prison medical officer on duty, "the death was due to the natural causes, presumably a massive heart attack", and the Registry has immediately requested the Dutch authorities "to conduct an inquest in accordance with the legal requirements of the Host State."

Dr. Milan Kovacevic was 57 years old and had a history of health problems. Just after his arrest in the first such SFOR operation on 10 July 1997 (see Update 36), Dr Kovacevic had two mild strokes. These attacks were the reason why his initial appearance before the Tribunal was delayed for almost three weeks, during which his health was examined by Dutch and Yugoslav doctors. The defence then demanded his provisional release.

The Trial Chamber ordered instead an examination by two teams of cardiologists and psychologists from Holland, Great Britain, the United States and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, representing the prosecution and the defence. On the basis of their report, the Trial Chamber in January this year rejected the defence's demand for provisional release of the accused, concluding that Dr Kovacevic's physical and psychological conditions were not as bad as to make him unable to withstand the custody and the trial.

Indeed, when the trial began on 6 July 1998 and when Dr Kovacevic had to plead again in regard of the indictment -which was amended in the meantime to incorporate other crimes along with genocide- he left the impression that he was in much better health than a year before.

Death was again faster than justice. On 29 June 1998 the accused, Slavko Dokmanovic, was found dead in his cell. The Tribunal's internal inquiry established that he committed suicide by hanging himself to the wardrobe door by his own tie. Dokmanovic killed himself at the final stage of the trial, just days before the verdict was to be announced on 7 July.

In the first two weeks of Dr Kovacevic's trial, only three prosecution witnesses were heard (Sophi Greve, Muhamed Sejmenovic and Ed Vulliamy - see Updates 84 and 85). The trial was scheduled to resume on 21 September 1998. As the death of Dokmanovic resulted in no final verdict being announced, so too the death of Kovacevic now means the case against him has been closed. Nevertheless, the cases of the massacre in Ovcará in Vukovar (of which Dokmanovic was accused) and the genocide of the non-Serb population of the Prijedor municipality in north-west Bosnia (in which, according to the prosecutor, Kovacevic was an accomplice) will remain open.

Other people who are still at large are accused of the same crimes. Three officers of the former Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), Mile Mrksic, Veselin Sljivancanin and Miroslav Radic are accused of the mass execution of at least 200 people on 20 November 1991 in Ovcará. Along with the late Kovacevic and Simo Drljaca, who was killed in the arrest operation, an unspecified number of the Bosnian Serb political and military leaders who were members of the Prijedor municipality Crisis Headquarters at the time of the crime, are accused by the so-called sealed indictments.

They are charged with "ethnic cleansing" of some 50 000 Bosniaks (Muslims) and Croats and with crimes in the Omarska, Keraterm and Trnopolje camps. It is believed that the list of the indicted may be identical with the list of the Crisis Headquarters members, which was published in the item 177 of the UN Expert Commission Report (the so-called Bassiouni Commission).

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