

"Sellotape" Murder Trial Gets Underway

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Once powerful Croatian parliamentarian implicated in infamous crime issues not guilty plea. The most senior Croatian politician to be accused of war crimes went on trial this week, accused of the torture and murder of Serb civilians during Croatia's 1991-5 war of independence.

Branimir Glavas, a member of parliament who was once one of the country's most powerful politicians, denies involvement in any crimes committed during his time in command of troops in Osijek, a city in eastern Croatia.

A court in this city indicted him for allegedly ordering troops to abduct, torture and murder a group of Serbs in late 1991. This is known as the "sellotape case" because the Serbs' mouths were sealed with tape before they were shot and dumped in the river Drava.

Glavas had already been under investigation in the "garage case", in which he is accused of ordering his troops to force civilians to drink battery acid.

Both cases are cited in a single indictment against him and six others.

Radoslav Ratkovic is the only one of the civilians named in the indictment for the "sellotape case" to be alive. He was shot twice in the head and thrown into the river with his hands bound, but miraculously survived and should appear as one of key witnesses.

In 1991, Glavas was secretary of the territorial defence, a civilian post, in Osijek but he soon formed his own military unit. During the war, and especially after it ended, he became one of the most powerful men in Croatia, thanks to his role in Osijek's defence against Serb forces.

The fact that he was one of the founders of Croatia's ruling party, the Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, and that he was very close to the country's first president, the late Franjo Tudjman, meant that he was untouchable.

Glavas was expelled from the HDZ last year. He accuses the party leaders of being jealous of his popularity in eastern Croatia and manufacturing the allegations to undermine him.

He has already staged three hunger strikes in protest against his detention, imposed because of fears he might pose a threat to potential witnesses.

"Your honour, I don't consider myself guilty of any of the counts in this indictment," he told the court when the case finally got under way. His six co-accused also pleaded not guilty.

The prosecutors have proposed calling 44 witnesses for the garage case, including Krunoslav Fehir, who

was only 16 at the time of the crimes but was a member of Glavas' unit and claims to have personally witnessed the torture and then murder of Serb Cedomir Vuckovic. Fehir has said Glavas personally ordered the killings of these civilians.

A second key witness, known only as "witness number 6", was allegedly present at Glavas's headquarters when Vuckovic was killed. Other proposed witnesses include journalists, Vuckovic's daughter and wife, and Zlatko Kramaric, who like Glavas used to be mayor of Osijek.

In the sellotape case, in which ten civilians are alleged to have been murdered, prosecutors propose calling more than a hundred witnesses who had different roles in Osijek during the war, and who should give their accounts of the murders on the banks of the Drava.

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