

## **Serb Paramilitaries Blamed for Murders in Sanski Most**

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Former Bosnian Serb army colonel says he thought his men treated population and prisoners humanely.

A prosecution witness in the Hague war crimes trial of two former Bosnian Serb police commanders testified this week that most of the murders of Muslims and Croats in the Sanski Most municipality were committed by unidentified paramilitary troops.

Retired Bosnian Serb Army, VRS, colonel Branko Basara was testifying for the first time in the trial of Stojan Zupljanin and Mico Stanisic.

Zupljanin, the former head of the Regional Security Services Centre in Banja Luka and adviser to Bosnian Serb political leader Radovan Karadzic (himself awaiting trial), is accused of the extermination, murder, persecution, and deportation of non-Serbs in north-western Bosnia between April and December 1992.

His co-accused, Stanisic, is charged with murder, torture and cruel treatment of non-Serb civilians, as well as for failure to prevent or punish crimes committed by his subordinates. The indictment against Stanisic states that he was appointed minister in charge of the newly-founded Bosnian Serb ministry of internal affairs in April 1992 and was also a member of the Bosnian Serb government.

The pair, whose indictments were joined together in September 2008, have both pleaded not guilty to all counts.

Stanisic and Zupljanin are also alleged to have participated in a joint criminal enterprise in 1992, aimed at the permanent removal of non-Serbs from the territory of an intended Serb state.

They are accused of crimes committed between April 1 and December 31, 1992 throughout Bosnia and Hercegovina, including the Sanski Most municipality.

Giving testimony via video link from the Serbian capital Belgrade, Basara said that he had been mobilised by the Yugoslav People's Army, JNA, as a reserve officer and dispatched to the town of Jasenovac on the western border of Bosnia and Croatia.

“My unit numbered some 1,000 soldiers,” he said. “In early April 1992, I was named commander of the 6th Krajina brigade of the Bosnian Serb army, which was under the command of the 5th Krajina corps of the JNA. My command and zone of responsibility was in an area between Bosanska Krupa and Sanski Most, although it belonged more to Sanski Most municipality [in north-western Bosnia].”

Basara confirmed that, after he had come to Sanski Most, he regularly took part in meetings with the municipal crisis staff of the Serbian Democratic Party, SDS, made up of local political and police leaders.

He said that the army had not issued any orders to the police regarding everyday civilian duties. The defence team had argued that the police was subordinate to the army in all aspects.

"I have never had a police unit in Sanski Most territory under my command," the witness said.

The witness agreed with the prosecutor that the VRS was obliged to enforce the will of the political leadership, adding that Karadzic was the president of Republika Srpska, RS, and thus the supreme army commander.

Prosecutor Joanna Korner pointed to several murders carried out in the Sanski Most municipality in the spring and summer of 1992, including that of 17 civilians by members of the VRS during the disarming of the village of Hrustovo.

The witness said the people "were Muslims, all of which were civilians, yet all of whom were killed while awaiting to put on our uniforms and receive weapons to join our army".

He said that one of his battalion commanders had made a deal with a group of Muslim men to to join the VRS forces, but when they were supposed to peacefully hand their weapons over, there was allegedly a shootout in which two Serb soldiers were killed. The Muslim men were subsequently also killed by paramilitaries, according to the witness.

"I claim that the perpetrators of that crime were arrested and turned over to the police in Sanski Most," Basara continued, adding that he had not undertaken any further steps in order to ensure that they were judged for their criminal acts.

"After their arrest, it is not clear to me what happened to them, I never asked around as I thought that they would be processed by the police. Do understand that I had no time to dwell much on individual cases."

Basara also said that he thought that all his soldiers had treated the population and prisoners humanely and in a civilised manner. But he added, "There were some exceptions, where certain measures had to be taken in order to ensure proper punishment."

He blamed individuals from paramilitary units whose identity could not be determined for the murder of more than 15 civilians at the Vrpolje bridge in Sanski Most municipality, in May of 1992, an incident which was mentioned by the prosecution this week.

"As I could myself observe, I knew that as the civilians retreated from Hrustovo, there was an unknown, probably paramilitary group, which had killed a certain number of civilians on the bridge. When I reached the bridge with the police, that unknown group of people had run away to Kljuc municipality," he said.

"The police could not determine who had killed the civilians, as the accused had run away into the forest and were impossible to track down. They did it in such a rapid way that the police could do nothing, in fact, nobody could have done anything."

Basara was asked by the prosecutor whether he had ever demanded that the police arrest members of

paramilitary formations which were "pillaging and murdering". He said that he had not, because he believed that the police "could not possibly have done anything".

Asked about the ethnic composition of the police in Sanski Most in 1992, the witness answered, "Most of them were Serbs."

Judge Guy Delvoie asked Basara how many people had committed the crime on the bridge. He answered, "Seven or eight, as far as I had seen, but I do know they all wore camouflage uniforms."

The prosecution asked how many people were killed on that occasion. "Some 15 people must have been in the group, I do not know for sure," Basara replied.

"So what happened to the bodies of the victims?" asked Prosecutor Korner.

"The terrain was sanitised and cleaned up that very evening by the civilian staff in Sanski Most municipality," Basara said. "They disposed of the bodies somewhere. I didn't check where they had done it."

The trial continues next week.

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