

## **Siege Was “Noose” Around Sarajevans**

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BBC man recounts hardships and risks faced by residents during the 44-month campaign against their city.

British journalist Jeremy Bowen told the Hague tribunal trial of Radovan Karadzic this week that he believed the siege of Sarajevo was used as a weapon of war by the Bosnian Serbs.

“It was simply a noose around the neck of the ordinary people in the city which could be tightened and loosened as necessary,” he said.

Karadzic, the first president of Republika Srpska, RS, and supreme commander of its armed forces, has been charged with 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including orchestrating the 44-month campaign of sniping and shelling of the city of Sarajevo, whose aim was to “terrorise the civilian population”, and which resulted in nearly 12,000 civilian deaths.

The indictment alleges that Karadzic was responsible for crimes of persecution, extermination, murder and forcible transfer which “contributed to achieving the objective of the permanent removal of Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats from Bosnian Serb-claimed territory”.

After years as a fugitive, Karadzic was arrested in Belgrade on July 21, 2008 and his trial started in October 2009.

Prosecution witness Bowen, now the BBC’s Middle East editor, reported from various parts of Bosnia and Hercegovina, including Sarajevo, Gorazde and Srebrenica, between 1992 and 1995. He told the court that when he first came to the Bosnian capital in July 1992, he saw that life was desperate.

“People would stand in line for water and food despite all the fear and dangers,” he said. “They had to avoid snipers, living in horrid conditions, without access to communications, it was a time before internet and mobile phones, and they were simply cut off.”

The witness stated that the population’s fear and anxiety continued to deteriorate. “In 1995, briefly before the end of the war, the conditions in which people were living in were worse, and despite all the humanitarian aid, the desperation was enormous,” he continued.

“Sniper fire had become a part of the citizens’ lives. People had to run, I had to run as well, although as journalist I was privileged to wear bulletproof clothing, or to have money. However, we had to realise how it was to be found in a situation in which you could simply be shot.”

Bowen said that he had personally seen “bodies of the dead and of sniper victims”, explaining that foreign cameramen used to film crossroads, or rather film citizens running across crossroads hoping not to be shot by snipers. Recalling one sniper incident he witnessed during lunchtime at the Sarajevo Holiday Inn hotel, he said that he saw a man shot in the leg while running across the parking lot.

“I saw bullets falling around him, he fell to the ground, I ran out with a colleague and a vehicle, and we wanted to save him, but by the time we got there he was gone; only a stain of blood had remained on the asphalt,” Bowen said.

The witness emphasised that Sarajevo’s residents were never able to feel safe, recounting how the pavements throughout the city were dotted with weapon marks and craters, and one could never know where the next mortar would hit.

“I used to report about the bombing of Sarajevo, every morning we had have a meeting at the UN headquarters and every morning would begin with the shelling and the number of mortars which fell during yesterday, and the numbers were often four-figure. You could never know that shelling would happen because it could happen anywhere and anytime,” the witness continued.

“During shelling, it was dangerous to be outdoors, but if you wanted to report on it you could just stand in front of Kosevo hospital to see wounded people being brought in some 20 or 30 minutes after the shelling.”

Prosecutor Carolyn Edgerton showed a BBC report by the witness, without stating its date in the courtroom. In the film, Bowen reported on an incident in which at least five family members and close friends of a certain Zijad Kujundjic had been killed. The account was included onto the prosecution’s evidence record.

“This news report demonstrated that the shelling was going on everywhere and at all times,” Bowen said, “while you moved through Sarajevo, you were vulnerable.” The prosecution also showed another BBC story

on how a two-year-old girl, Vedrana Glavas, had been killed, alongside a boy named Roki Sulejmanovic who was several months younger.

They died on August 1, 1992, when a bus full of children from the Ljubica Ivezic orphanage was fired upon. This BBC report was also included onto the record.

The witness said that he and colleagues from Reuters tried to attend the funeral of the girl, alongside her mother and grandmother. However, by the time the family members and the journalists arrived at the cemetery, the funeral had already been carried out because the cemetery had been targeted by sniper and artillery fire.

A boy from the orphanage, who had come with his friends to bring some flowers to the funeral, had been wounded during the funeral. The grandmother of the girl had also been wounded. Describing that day, Bowen said, "I have extremely rich experience covering conflict and I have seen some really bad things, but I get furious even today when I think of this very, very cruel day." "Even during a funeral you were still exposed to artillery fire," he continued, adding that the cemetery was targeted very often.

In his film at the time, he reported that gunfire from Serb positions. "The Serbs said that it was a set-up and that the Bosnian authorities had been setting up incidents of shelling and sniper fire knowing that foreign cameras would be there, and that they would film those things, but I can't believe it," Bowen told the tribunal.

"The city was a permanent target and was being shot even while the cameras were off, so I cannot believe that any of it had been staged for us. "I stand by my statements, 100 per cent, because I believe them to be based on solid facts."

The trial continues next week.

### **Velma Saric is an IWPR-trained journalist in Sarajevo.**

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