

Sljivancanin Rejects Selection Claims

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The former Yugoslav People's Army officer denies allegations that he used lists to pick out patients at Vukovar hospital.

Former Yugoslav People's Army officer, JNA, Veselin Sljivancanin this week continued to claim that he had no role in the massacre of some 260 patients and civilians taken from the Vukovar hospital in November 1991.

During cross-examination by the prosecution and lawyers for his fellow defendants, he also denied allegations that he used lists with names of people considered as "the political and military opponents of the JNA" to personally select detainees at the Vukovar hospital to be executed.

Sljivancanin said the media had spread false rumours about him and that being on trial at the tribunal meant he was up against "a very powerful organisation".

"I'm caught between the devil and the deep blue sea," Sljivancanin told prosecutor Marks Moore.

He portrayed himself as an "honourable man from an honourable country" maligned by false rumours and the court system itself.

Sljivancanin and former JNA officers Mile Mrksic and Miroslav Radic are charged with having command responsibility over the soldiers alleged to have killed the people taken from the hospital.

The prosecution claims that on the morning of November 20, 1991, Sljivancanin used lists to personally pick out non-Serbs from the crowds at the Vukovar hospital, considered to be Croat soldiers disguised as patients.

According to the indictment, these detainees were later loaded onto buses and transported to Ovcarica farm where they were tortured and then executed.

"What distresses me the most as a human being [is] that I should be featured in this kind of indictment," he said. "The crime was committed not by human beings but by cowards, by psychopaths...It disgraces all of the JNA."

Although he was indicted in 1995, Sljivancanin did not come to The Hague until July 2003 after he was arrested by security forces in Belgrade following a 10-hour confrontation between police and his supporters.

However, this week Sljivancanin said he came to the tribunal to clear his name for the sake of his family and his child, apparently suggesting that he came of his own accord.

He again blamed the territorial defence units for the atrocities committed at Ovčara, but admitted to consulting the local troops in order to identify and make lists of non-Serbs who had committed war crimes, which Sljivancanin defined as taking up arms against the JNA.

He said if the JNA came across anyone from the lists, they questioned the person. If they obtained a confession or thought their suspicions were justified, the person was arrested.

Sljivancanin described the tracking down of leaders of the town's defenders as his most important task.

But Moore brought out lists of names of Croat fighters made by security officials including Sljivancanin in an attempt to show that the JNA research extended far beyond the leaders of the Croat resistance.

"You were picking out people, not leaders, that were politically or militarily opposed to you," said Moore. Although Sljivancanin had suggested the lists consisted of 10 or 15 names, Moore brought out several documents that contained as many as 30 names, some of which he read aloud in the silent courtroom.

Moore pointed out that a significant number of people on the list either had the same name or the same surname as someone murdered at Ovčara.

Still, Sljivancanin claimed he did not have a list with him when he was at Vukovar hospital, adding that members of the Croatian military and police, who were among the patients, were actually given away by the doctors and the hospital director.

Sljivancanin objected to the notion that the Croats were in fact defending Vukovar, calling their resistance an "armed rebellion".

"We were all defending Vukovar," he said. "It depends on your point of view."

Sljivancanin told Moore he went into Vukovar as a JNA officer who believed in the country of Yugoslavia and believed it would survive.

He said he never witnessed any acts of vengeance on the part of JNA soldiers.

"I really admired my soldiers for helping [the townspeople]," said Sljivancanin. "They were not infected by hatred and revenge-seeking. I taught them what to do and how to behave."

The disorder, he implied, was a problem among the locals and with the territorial defence units, not the JNA, which "sought to establish complete law and order".

"There was fighting, people were selling and buying weapons, people were arming themselves," he added. "There's always fear."

Sljivancanin also answered questions from his co-defendant's lawyers and the prosecution about Mrksic's role at Vukovar.

Sljivancanin, a major at Vukovar, made it clear that it was the then Colonel Mrksic who issued orders, repeating several times that he did not have the authority to do so.

Sljivancanin also acknowledged that Ovchara was in the area of responsibility of Operational Group South, which at the time was under the command of Colonel Mrksic.

But he also seemed to support his co-accused, saying that he and Mrksic had "done their best to establish security" but were unable to place a policeman in "every corner".

Although Sljivancanin claimed Mrksic had done his best, Moore at one point suggested that Mrksic was an ambitious officer who had gone to Vukovar "with a question mark over his career from the powers that be".

Moore went on to say that Mrksic's career had been "built on the rubble of Vukovar", implying that the colonel had needed to defeat the Croatian forces at any cost. Sljivancanin said he "totally disagreed" with that statement.

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