

Sljivancanin Witnesses Renounce Previous Testimony

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Former JNA officers who said Sljivancanin was in charge of the Vukovar hospital evacuation now claim he was not responsible.

Defence witnesses for former Yugoslav People's Army, JNA, officer Veselin Sljivancanin this week said the accused was not in charge of the evacuation of detainees from Vukovar hospital.

This directly contradicted their statements given to the tribunal's prosecutors and at other trials, in which they implicated Sljivancanin as the man who was issuing orders for the evacuation.

Sljivancanin and his co-defendants, former JNA officers Mile Mrksic and Miroslav Radic, are charged with overseeing the November 1991 massacre of some 260 non-Serbs taken from the hospital. The detainees were allegedly bussed to Ovcara where they were tortured, humiliated and sexually abused before being murdered in a nearby ravine.

General Miodrag Panic, the former chief of staff of the Guard's Brigade, and Milivoje Simic, the former deputy commander of the 2nd Motorised Police Battalion, have both previously stated that Sljivancanin was in charge of the evacuation of Vukovar hospital.

This week, however, both men said they were mistaken and claimed that Colonel Nebojsa Pavkovic was the organiser.

Pavkovic is also currently on trial at the Hague tribunal for his role in the repression and expulsion of Albanians from Kosovo.

During cross-examination, prosecutor Phillip Weiner pointed out the discrepancy between Panic's signed witness statement saying that Sljivancanin had overseen the November 20 Vukovar evacuation and claims in court this week that Pavkovic was to blame.

He noted that Panic had spent several hours correcting his statement and said he could not understand why he had not changed it to reflect his view that Sljivancanin was not in fact responsible for the Vukovar evacuation.

Panic responded that while preparing for the trial he had seen new documents that put the situation in a different light.

He also said that while following the trial he realised that there were times he had been "misled, confused or simply wrong" in his assessment of the situation at Vukovar.

"I had given some people assignments they didn't have at the time," said Panic. "The person I have in mind specifically is Major Sljivancanin. I realised based on the documents that Colonel Pavkovic was in charge of the evacuation, while Major Sljivancanin was in charge of security tasks."

Lawyers for Sljivancanin have attempted to prove that his security role meant that he could not have overseen the evacuation and the massacre at Ovcar.

Weiner also claimed that Panic was present when Pavkovic put Sljivancanin in charge, and noted that Panic could not produce a document placing Pavkovic in command.

During re-examination, Sljivancanin's defence counsel suggested that documents placing Pavkovic in command could have been destroyed during the 1999 NATO bombings.

Later in the week, Simic also renounced statements he gave before a court in Belgrade in 1999 and to tribunal prosecutors in 2005 regarding Sljivancanin's role at Vukovar.

Prosecutor Marks Moore referred to this previous testimony and questioned the motives behind Simic's changed position.

"In 1999 and in 2005, Sljivancanin was in charge on the 19 and 20 of November, according to your statements," Moore told Simic. "Now you speak with some friends, come to The Hague and he's not?"

Simic denied that he had ever received orders from Sljivancanin and said he had believed Sljivancanin was in charge solely because he was the highest-ranking officer at the evacuation.

Echoing Panic, Simic said in the past year he had come to better understand Sljivancanin's duties and had realised he could not have been in charge at Vukovar.

However, Simic, who remained outside the hospital during the evacuation, also acknowledged that he did not know what role Sljivancanin played inside the hospital on November 20.

Moore suggested that Simic believed Sljivancanin was in charge at Vukovar based not only on his rank but on his behaviour as well.

Simic said he disagreed.

Both Panic and Simic deny they saw Sljivancanin issue any orders at Vukovar.

Additionally, Simic, who was responsible for searching the detainees before they were loaded onto buses, claimed he had never heard of a JNA list containing the names of people security officers wanted to further investigate.

He also rejected previous witness claims that valuables and personal papers were taken from the detainees when they were searched.

Simic denied seeing territorial defence forces inside the hospital grounds, but acknowledged that some surrounded the compound. He described them as verbally threatening the detainees and said they may have had a desire to “mete out justice on their own”.

Nevertheless, Simic said the soldiers were all talk and maintained that they posed no real threat. He said he was much more concerned about the possibility that disguised Croat paramilitaries were among the hospital patients.

The Mrksic trial will resume on November 20.

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