

## **Srebrenica Mass Graves Allegedly Interfered With**

**Author:** [Velma Šarić](#)

Tolimir trial hears burial pits in Orahovac area had been disturbed on three occasions.

A forensic anthropologist told the trial of Zdravko Tolimir this week that his exhumation of mass graves in the Orahovac area during the summer of 2000 showed that the sites had been tampered with since they were originally dug in July 1995.

Tolimir, the former assistant commander for military intelligence and security in the Bosnian Serb Army, VRS, general staff, is charged with eight counts including genocide, conspiring to perpetrate genocide, murder, extermination, expulsion, forced transfer of population and deportation of Bosnian Muslims from Srebrenica and Zepa in eastern Bosnia, in July of 1995.

According to the indictment against Tolimir, former second-in-command to General Ratko Mladic for security issues at the Bosnian Serb army, VRS, general staff, about 1,000 Bosniak men imprisoned after the fall of the Srebrenica enclave were executed near Orahovac on July 14, 1995. Their bodies, according to the indictment, were buried in mass graves dug by members of the engineering squad of the Zvornik brigade on July 14 and 15.

Guatemalan forensic anthropologist Fredy Peccerelli gave testimony regarding these sites, known as Lazete I and II, noting that these areas had been dug up on another three occasions since July 1995.

Peccerelli earlier testified in the Popovic trial in March 2007, and his statement from that trial was included into the record.

At the beginning of this week's trial, prosecutor Rupert Elderkin read a resume of the witness's statement specifying that he had worked for the tribunal on the exhumation of mass graves between 1997 and 2000.

"The witness was responsible for finding grave sites, identifying its contents, caring for the chain of evidence and placing human remains from the mass graves into cooled chambers which were transported to the morgue in Visoko," the prosecutor read.

"In 2000, Mr Peccerelli was in charge of a team working on the mass grave in Lazete I. It contained 127 bodies and two further bodies were found in the neighbouring trench. Eighty-nine people probably had their eyes bound.

"That year, Mr Peccerelli was also the supervisor of the exhumation of bodies from the mass grave at Lazete II which was nearby. It was previously dug up in 1996 by a team from Physicians for Human Rights (PHR). It was also clear that, apart from that exhumation in 1996, bodies were also being previously taken out from the grave, and by unauthorised action, because in parts the bodies were only partial or cut through."

The prosecutor also stated that 16 bodies "including parts of bodies and a large number of artifacts mostly consisting of projectile shell remains" were exhumed from the Lazete II mass grave site.

Asked this week about his career as a forensic archeologist and anthropologist, Peccerelli stated that he began working in 1995 for the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, and his duty was to "find and exhume remains from mass graves in Guatemala, as well as analyse the remains and try to identify them, and to determine the cause of death.

"I would then deliver witness statements to the Guatemala prosecution or the general prosecutor's office, and then the remains would be identified and given back to the families."

Peccerelli added that he currently acts as an executive director for the foundation, which employs 96 people working in four departments.

Looking back on his work in Bosnia, the witness confirmed that the locality in question was close to Orahovac, "on a path towards the school", adding that at the time of exhumation he had little information about Orahovac.

"I later found out that some of the Srebrenica victims were allegedly taken there before being taken to the Lazete locality," he added.

Noting that the trial chamber judges had visited Lazete and Orahovac, the prosecutor asked the witness to explain which site was Lazete I, and which Lazete II.

"Lazete I is the grave by the road, next to the crossroads, and Lazete II is on the other side of the railway tracks," the witness replied. "Lazete I is a smaller locality, while Lazete II is much larger, already exhumed by PHR in 1996."

Peccerelli said he had worked on Lazete I between July 13 and August 8, 2000, adding, "We were lucky to have satellite images showing how it was before it had been dug up. One photograph of July 5, 1995, shows that the ground is untouched, the next one of July 27 shows it dug up in two places."

"We raised the upper layers of the ground until some 10 centimetres of depth, and determined that this was a mass grave since its shape was starting to show."

Another feature the witness identified in a photo displayed by the prosecution was the grey colour of the ground.

"This shows that previously that there was a trench here, following the path of a water pipe," he said. "That pipe was probably accidentally cut as the grave was being made, and then repaired afterward. This was interesting for us to see, because whoever repaired the pipe must have known about the grave."

"We started extracting its contents. It was very easy to remove the compact ground, when the dead bodies started showing."

He explained that the remains were found mainly in three areas within the grave.

"Between the concentration of bodies there were gaps without integral bodies, but rather only with partial remains. That showed us that the bodies which were initially there were now someplace else," he said, adding that Lazete II was a big site, with "127 bodies within and two further ones in a nearby field canal".

Asked by the prosecutor whether any evidence was found that showed how the grave was dug, or how it was later dug up clandestinely, the witness answered that traces of machinery were found as well as other indicators "showing that the basic contours of the grave were changed by secondary exhumation".

"Bodies were found which were cut in the process of unauthorised digging," he added.

The witness also answered a question by the prosecutor regarding the 456 casings of firearms ammunition which were found in and around the mass grave.

"This ballistic evidence was found in the grave itself, but also around it, staying preserved on the site of the crime because secondary vegetation had grown around them," he explained.

Peccerelli added that the ammunition displayed strike marks on the bottom, showing that it had been used. The other material evidence which was found was a kind of textile, probably blindfolds, on 89 bodies, leading to the conclusion that their eyes were bound. Three bodies had personal identification papers on them.

Asked by the prosecutor whether he had any information on survivors of the site, the witness said that "one of the investigators said that there had been one survivor who said that the people were brought from the school [in Orahovac] to the field, that they were simply lined up and shot and later pushed into the mass grave".

Discussing the Lazete II site, the witness said that work on it started on August 2, 2000.

"We actually ended Lazete I sooner than we thought, so that I was asked to go into the field to check out the other mass grave because there were hints that during exhumation in 1996 some bodies had remained [buried]," he said.

On the surface of the site, they found 671 casings, the witness said.

"It was a significantly larger mass grave [than Lazete I], with a total of 830 artifacts," he continued, adding that material evidence chimed with that found at Lazete I.

The prosecutor wanted to know why Lazete II was not fully exhumed in 1996. The witness answered that there had been security problems, adding that "a decision had to be taken about how much time could be spent at the site safely, so rather than digging up the whole surface, the team dug up only two trenches, discovering two concentrations of bodies and concluding that these were possibly two separate mass graves".

"However, we found out that Lazete II does not consist of two graves, but is rather a large grave of 37 metres by four metres," he added.

Peccerelli also said that it was interesting that the same water pipe situation appeared on the other site, too.

“Whoever dug up the initial mass grave, whoever dug the grave up in order to deposit the bodies, cut this water pipe and it had to be repaired subsequently,” he explained, adding that 16 bodies and 26 parts of bodies had been found there.

“This was a very complex undertaking because essentially four exhumations had been carried out on the site. The first one was somewhere between July 5 and July 27, 1995. Only two months later, it had been dug up again [for the third time]. Between September 7 and 27, 1995, someone came back and dug up the areas,” he continued, pointing to areas shown on a photograph and marked A and B.

A significant number of the bodies and their parts had been taken away, whereas those on the edges of the mass grave were kept on site, he said.

After PHR dug the site up for the third time, the fourth and last exhumation was the one Peccerelli was in charge of during the summer of 2000.

The trial continues next week.

**Velma Saric is an IWPR-trained reporter in Sarajevo .**

**Location:** Balkans

**Topic:** International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/srebrenica-mass-graves-allegedly-interfered>