

Srebrenica: Pleading with General Mladic

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Survivor recounts meetings with Bosnian Serb general in the days leading up to the massacre.

The first witness in the much-anticipated resumption of the trial of two Bosnian Serb officers indicted for their role in the July 1995 Srebrenica massacre painted a chilling picture of how the deportation of civilians unfolded.

Nesib Mandzic was a high school teacher in Srebrenica before the war, and by sheer chance he was picked by the Netherlands peacekeepers to represent the Muslim population in a series of meetings with Bosnian Serb General Ratko Mladic on July 12.

The Dutch decision to appoint him saved Mandzic's life, enabling him to come to the tribunal some eight years later to testify about what he saw.

Vidoje Blagojevic, commander of the Bosnian Serb army's Bratunac brigade, and Dragan Jokic, chief of engineering in the Zvornik brigade, are on trial to answer accusations that they helped organise the massacre and orchestrated a cover-up afterwards. More than 7,000 men and boys were killed by Serb forces in the area. The two officers are charged with complicity in genocide, crimes against humanity and violations of law or customs of war.

Mandzic's testimony set the scene for the massacre and showed how determined the Bosnian Serbs were to deport Srebrenica's civilian population.

He described how 15,000 of Srebrenica's Muslim inhabitants gathered at the UN camp at Potocari, just outside town, seeking refuge with the Dutch peacekeepers, when Serb troops moved into the enclave on the afternoon of July 11.

Mladic requested a meeting with Muslim authorities, but Srebrenica's leadership - along with most of the male population - had already fled. Mandzic, who had undergone surgery only a month earlier, had been too weak to go with them.

The Dutch battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Thom Karremans, told Mandzic that he wanted to talk to Mladic about evacuating the desperate women, children and elderly who were sheltering in Potocari.

"He told me that the Serb army was requesting a meeting with local authorities. They knew that they could not find them, and the only thing they could do was to find someone from among the refugees," Mandzic said, explaining why he was picked.

Mandzic went to the first meeting with Mladic on the evening of July 11 accompanied only by a few Dutch officers.

At the meeting, Mandzic said, Mladic demanded that all soldiers who were still in Potocari lay down their arms. Mandzic knew that none of the refugees in Potocari had weapons, but was too afraid to say so.

"I could not dictate any conditions to the Dutch battalion, let alone the Bosnian Serb army," he told the court.

When Karremans suggested evacuating the refugees, the witness told Mladic how many refugees there were in Potocari and asked whether senior United Nations officials were aware of the situation. In reply, the general looked at Mandzic and said the refugees's survival depended on him, Mladic.

Nothing was decided at that meeting, but Mladic asked to meet the delegation again the following day. This time, two other local Muslims - Ibko Nuhanovic and a woman called Camila Omanovic - went along as well.

During this second meeting, on the morning of July 12, a soldier came into the room and said that some of the Muslims from Srebrenica had come to Bratunac. "He asked what he should do with them," said Mandzic.

Mladic told the soldier to take them to the football stadium in Bratunac. "That was meant to intimidate us," explained Mandzic, "because Muslims had been killed in that football stadium in Bratunac in April 1992."

Eventually, the Bosnian Serb commander agreed to allow the United Nations to evacuate the civilian population. But he was to go back on his word within hours, sending his own buses and trucks to transport the civilians that afternoon.

"As we were leaving, Nuhanovic pleaded with Mladic to spare their lives. He told him that these were all innocent people, miserable... But Mladic did not say anything," said the witness.

When the three-member Muslim delegation returned to the Dutch base a few hours later, Mandzic spoke via satellite phone to a minister in the Bosnian government, Hasan Muratovic. He said he asked for help, but the minister told him to be patient, "He said that we should wait and that in two hours English and French troops would take action in Srebrenica to protect the civilian population."

That action never came, however, and Mladic's vehicles started bussing away the refugees.

"Serb soldiers came to the Dutch camp every day, they threatened us, none of us believed that we would survive," the witness said.

By the next day, July 13, the entire population of Srebrenica was deported, including Mandzic's two fellow-negotiators. Nuhanovic is still missing. Only around a dozen people, one of them Mandzic, remained at the Dutch base.

Mandzic eventually left the enclave on July 21 with the Dutch battalion. However, before he was allowed to go, Bosnian Serb soldiers asked him to sign a declaration saying that the evacuation had been conducted "in accordance with the Geneva Convention".

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