

TV Journalist Testifies Against Karadzic

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Wartime Bosnian Serb leader says Sky News reporter was one-sided in his Sarajevo coverage.

A television journalist testifying at the Hague tribunal this week denied accusations by war crimes indictee Radovan Karadzic that his wartime reporting from Sarajevo was biased.

The journalist, Aernaut van Lynden, was a correspondent for Sky News in Croatia and Bosnia from 1991 to 1995. He arrived in Sarajevo during May 1992, shortly after war had broken out and heavy shelling and sniping were pounding the city.

At the beginning of his testimony, prosecutors showed several clips from reports Van Lynden filed in 1992. In one of them, from June 5, the viewer sees a night sky illuminated with repeated bursts of green light. Sounds of explosions echo in the background.

Van Lynden's voice narrates the report, stating, "The city is hit ... by every imaginable projectile. Heavy shells are slamming into buildings, engulfing them into flames. The city is being obliterated while the world watches and does nothing."

Van Lynden said the footage was filmed from an upper storey of a military hospital where he and his crew were staying.

In a June 7 clip, he reported from an intensive care ward "packed with amputees in pain".

"It's a place of haphazard death where maggots crawl the floor," Van Lynden said in his voiceover. "A little house of Bosnian horror."

Karadzic, president of the self-declared Republika Srpska from 1992 to 1996, is charged with overseeing the 44-month sniping and shelling campaign against Sarajevo, which killed nearly 12,000 people.

The indictment, which lists 11 counts in total, alleges that he was responsible for crimes of genocide, 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".

When it was Karadzic's turn to cross examine the witness, he said that Van Lynden's reports were "so biased" that "people gained the impression that Serbs were doing all the shooting [and suffered] no losses".

"Were you biased?" Karadzic asked.

"Whether I'm biased or not, I leave it to the court to decide," Van Lynden responded. "I do not believe I was biased. I have a bias against war in general after 25 years of being a war correspondent."

He said that he always tried to check information with the United Nations Protection Force, UNPROFOR, stationed in Bosnia at that time. He added that he filmed Bosnian government policemen firing small arms, and filed reports about criminal elements within the Bosnian forces.

"Our impression at the time, backed by the UN ... was that the heavy weaponry was basically on your side," Van Lynden said.

Karadzic pointed to several examples of Bosnian army aggression and Bosnian Serb losses and asked why Van Lynden did not report on them.

"If we were not shown and were not told, how were we meant to know?" Van Lynden asked. "You can't have correspondents in a war zone running around freely. I was never taken there by your government or your army."

Van Lynden added that when he was reporting from inside Bosnian government held territory in Sarajevo, it was "ridiculous" to expect him to "hop over" to the other side of the front lines to see what was happening, given the dangerous conditions.

He pointed out that he had a team in Pale, where the Bosnian Serb government was based. When he was there during June 1992, he said that when his team tried to leave their hotel, they would be arrested at checkpoints.

Van Lynden said that "at no time" did Karadzic inform him or his team in Pale of events happening behind

Bosnian Serb lines, nor were they invited to see the losses that Karadzic described this week.

"You can't blame us if we were refused by you and your government," Van Lynden reiterated. "...Under the difficult circumstances of war, we reported as best we could and accurately as possible."

In August 1992, Van Lynden met Karadzic in London and they arranged subsequent meetings in Belgrade and Pale.

During one meeting, Van Lynden said that Karadzic "made the point repeatedly that it was impossible to live with 'these people'" and that a wall should be built to separate Bosnian Serbs from Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and Croats.

"It was a fairly outrageous comment because it was made less than three years after the fall of the Berlin wall," Van Lynden said. "To make a suggestion to divide people in Europe in this manner, I found totally unacceptable, to be frank."

Karadzic this week challenged Van Lynden's assertions about the separation wall, as well as his claim that the accused had referred to Bosniaks as "Turks".

Karadzic asked why Van Lynden did not publicise what he called these alleged "drastic" comments at the time.

Van Lynden responded that they were off-the-record conversations held late in the evening over glasses of wine.

"The final point about you saying [Bosniaks] were Turks, that's how I recall it," Van Lynden said. "If you consider them Serbs, it seems strange we ever had this war."

Karadzic responded that "civil wars happen within the same people" and asked why it was acceptable to share comments from their conversation in court, but not in news reports.

"I was asked to tell the truth for a court of law," Van Lynden answered. "It's different when you're reporting for a TV station. I could not have proved [the comments] because I didn't have a camera there. That was an informal conversation. This is court of law."

Van Lynden also recalled a 1992 interview he had with General Ratko Mladic, who was the highest authority in the Bosnian Serb army and a close associate of Karadzic. Mladic, also wanted by the tribunal, has been evading arrest for years and is thought to be hiding in Serbia.

The prosecution showed a clip of Van Lynden and Mladic at one of the Bosnian Serb firing positions in the hills above Sarajevo.

"General Mladic is quite unrepentant," Van Lynden narrates. "He has the total assurance that he's right and the world is wrong."

In another part of the report not screened for the court, Van Lynden said he referred to Mladic as "the scourge of Sarajevo". He said while initial Bosnian Serb reactions to his piece were negative, he happened to encounter Mladic a few days later and the general had a "big smile on his face".

"[He said] 'I'm the scourge of Sarajevo'," Van Lynden recalled. "He clapped me on the back and invited us to have lunch with him. He seemed rather proud."

Van Lynden had to leave The Netherlands earlier than originally expected and Karadzic said he might ask for him to come back on another occasion and testify further. He said that Van Lynden and "all of the western media portrayed the situation in a way that was very harmful to us".

Karadzic had opposed Van Lynden giving evidence. He filed a motion on May 14 asking for judges to exclude the journalist's testimony, stating there had been "no valid waiver of war correspondent privilege" and that only his employer, Sky News, could waive the privilege that would allow him to testify.

Judges rejected the motion on May 17, calling it "frivolous and vexatious". They said Karadzic merely repeats "the same meritless" arguments he made in a previous motion concerning all war correspondents.

"Once again, the chamber expresses its concern about the manner in which the accused is employing his resources, while continuing to mention resource-limitations as an obstacle to his ongoing trial preparations," they said.

The trial continues next week with the testimony of Colm Doyle, head of the European Commission Monitoring Mission, ECMM, in Bosnia during 1991 and 1992.

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