

UK War Reporter Testifies in Karadzic Trial

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Journalist Ed Vulliamy describes scenes he witnessed in wartime detention camps.

In testimony at the trial of Radovan Karadzic this week, British journalist Ed Vulliamy described discovering the Bosnian Serb-run detention camps of Omarska and Trnopolje in August 1992.

Vulliamy, a long-term correspondent for the London-based Guardian newspaper, was one of the first journalists allowed inside the facilities, alongside a crew from the ITN television network.

He has written extensively on how he visited the canteen at Omarska and observed “cadaverous” prisoners there, but was not allowed to enter a nearby hangar where he suspected more detainees were being kept.

Video footage taken during Vulliamy’s visit to Trnopolje, showing emaciated prisoners standing behind barbed wire, made headlines around the world. The international uproar that ensued helped lead to the camps being shut down.

The camps have been the subject of several other trials at the tribunal, and Vulliamy has testified in many of them. Judges in one case determined that detainees at Omarska were “ferociously” beaten and “tortured in front of each other” before being killed. In previous judgements, conditions in the Omarska camp were found to be “appalling” with detainees given very little food and water.

Judges have also found that the Trnopolje camp was “brutal” though not as bad as Omarska and Keraterm.

Karadzic, who was president of the self-declared Bosnian Serb entity during the war, is challenging these previous findings. He has repeatedly claimed that Omarska, located in the town of Prijedor in northwestern Bosnia, was merely an “investigation centre” where people were brought for questioning after Bosnian Serb forces captured the area at the end of May 1992.

Prosecutors allege that Karadzic is responsible for crimes of genocide, persecution, extermination, murder and forcible transfer in various municipalities which “contributed to achieving the objective of the permanent removal of Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats from Bosnian Serb-claimed territory”.

He is also accused of planning and overseeing the 44-month siege of Sarajevo that left nearly 12,000 people dead, as well as the massacre of some 8,000 men and boys at Srebrenica in July 1995. Karadzic was arrested in Belgrade in July 2008, after 13 years on the run.

He is representing himself in the courtroom.

Because Vulliamy has testified before, the prosecution questioned him only briefly about his experience of visiting Omarska and Trnopolje.

“You mention being present in the [Omarska] canteen when detainees came in for food. Did you interview anyone or hear interviews being conducted?” prosecuting lawyer Ann Sutherland asked.

“We did interview one man only, who felt emboldened to speak... he told us that ‘I don’t want to tell any lies, but I cannot tell the truth’,” Vulliamy said. “I did speak to another man and I asked him how he got a wound on the side of his face, and he said he had fallen over,” he continued. “I have met him since, and he had not fallen over – the wound was otherwise inflicted.”

The prosecution also showed video footage from an ITN interview with Karadzic, broadcast shortly after Vulliamy’s visit, at a time when the camps were making international news.

The presenter is shown asking Karadzic whether the camps could be shut down within 30 days, to which he replies that he “could do that within two days”, if “the Muslim side” accepted his proposal for a prisoner exchange.

He also agrees to let journalists back inside the camp so that they can see the entire facility, and concedes that “the prison of Omarska is the worst one”.

Vulliamy said that this was not the way Karadzic had described Omarska when they had met previously at his headquarters in Pale, outside Sarajevo.

“Subsequent to my own inquiries, I think he was right. It was terrible,” Vulliamy said, adding that he had met with “scores” of survivors over the years.

"His remarks in that film seemed to confirm the impression [we had] when we met him in Pale [before our visit] – that he had authority... that we were going to [Omarska] on his authority," he continued.

During cross-examination, Karadzic asked Vulliamy about an article he wrote right after he visited Omarska, where he stated that there was no "visible evidence of serious violence" there.

"That means that we were seeing the people who were those selected to come into the canteen," Vulliamy responded. "The point I'm making here... is that we were trying to get into the hangar, the shed... where we had suspicions that appalling things were taking place. And hindsight has shown that they were."

Vulliamy added that the visitors were not allowed into the hangar even though Karadzic had said beforehand that they could see everything in the camp.

"And now that I know what I know, and what this tribunal knows, I can see why, because what was happening in there was absolutely appalling," Vulliamy said.

Karadzic asked the witness, "How do you know what took place inside, and how do you know the detainees shown to you were cherry-picked? Do you know it as a fact?"

Vulliamy replied, "Sir, I've heard from scores of people who were in Omarska that there was widespread and systematic killing and many [people] lost family there in appalling circumstances."

The witness also referred to the "tribunal's own record" on the matter.

Karadzic pressed the witness on this issue, asking who his "sources" were, and whether he was relying only on judgements made at the tribunal.

"My sources would be survivors of the camp, many of whom have testified to this tribunal on oath, international assessments that have been made, and some of the hundreds of people who have been bereaved by the murders in the camp," Vulliamy said.

He added that he had heard from a "number of survivors" that prior to his visit to Omarska, "large numbers of prisoners" were taken out on to the tarmac, known as the "pista", and that "groups were selected for presentation in the canteen".

"I've heard it from large numbers of people that they were the ones judged to be in better condition," Vulliamy said.

Karadzic responded by saying that detainees were taken out to the pista every day "to get some fresh air," and that this was unconnected with Vulliamy's visit.

"If I told you, Mr Vulliamy, that none is it is true, and that all those who said anything about killings [at Omarska and Keraterm] saw [only] a single killing of a person who was mentally disturbed, would you believe me or them?" Karadzic asked.

"It seems you choose to believe [what is] to the detriment of Serbs quite easily

Vulliamy responded, "I don't choose to believe things that are detrimental to one side or the other, and I don't believe that only one person was killed in Omarska and Keraterm together."

"If you tell me it's only one [killing], I don't believe you, sir. It's nothing personal, I've just heard differently from so many places and sources and people, including people testifying on oath at this tribunal whose testimony has been upheld in a number of cases."

Vulliamy said it was "irrelevant" whether his information was "to the detriment of the Serbs", adding, "That's not how I measure these things."

"With all due respect, it would be irrelevant if it were true," Karadzic countered. "However, I told you they all saw a single killing."

The discussion then turned to Trnopolje, the camp where the famous video footage of prisoners behind barbed wire was shot. Vulliamy described it as a "complicated place".

"Some people had been corralled there from villages and some people went there because their villages burned down," he said. "I came across so many reasons why people were in Trnopolje."

He said he refers to Trnopolje as a "concentration camp" because it was a "camp where people were concentrated after forced deportation".

Karadzic countered that the footage showing prisoners behind the barbed wire was staged, and that in fact, the wire enclosed the surrounding buildings, not the prisoners.

This was the argument advanced by the British magazine Living Marxism in the mid 1990s. ITN sued the magazine for libel, and won.

"I am, if anything, more convinced than even on that that day that those men were detained and under guard," Vulliamy said.

"How come you are more convinced today than when you saw things with [your] own two eyes?" Karadzic asked.

Vulliamy said that at the time, it was "very obvious they were prisoners". In addition, he said, he was able to interview those on the other side of the fence, and he was not "interviewing people from inside a facility, taking notes from people who were at liberty, wandering around".

"My description of [the men as] prisoners has been proved accurate over and over again," he added.

Karadzic also asked about the man featured in the most famous photograph of Trnopolje fence. The man, since identified as Fikret Alic, is shown topless in belted jeans that display a severely sunken belly and protruding ribs.

"How can you be so certain that this is not just how he normally looks?" Karadzic asked.

"I know that's not how he normally looks. I met him about ten months later and he looked very different... he hadn't had much medical attention, just something to eat," Vulliamy said.

During the cross-examination, Karadzic repeatedly brought up allegations that Vulliamy was biased against Serbs.

"Do you really think these accusations are unfounded?" Karadzic asked.

Vulliamy repeatedly denied being biased, and said that "where something is fact-specific, I remain objective."

"If you go into a house and you see six bodies, it's not 12 because they are Muslim, or three because they are Serb - it's six," he continued.

However, Vulliamy said, he could not claim neutrality regarding what he saw in Bosnia during the war.

"I am not neutral between camp guards and prisoners, between raped women and rapists," he said. "I do not claim to be neutral over the sort of violence I was witnessing."

The trial continues next week.

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