

UN Hostage Speaks of Execution Fears

Author: [Rachel Irwin](#)

Ex-Canadian observer tells court how he feared for his life after being seized by Bosnian Serb soldiers.

A former United Nations military observer testified this week at the Hague tribunal that he was taken hostage by soldiers in Radovan Karadzic's army and repeatedly threatened with violence.

Canadian army major Patrick Rechner is the fifth prosecution witness in recent weeks to describe his ordeal as a hostage during the Bosnian war.

On May 25 and 26, 1995, NATO forces conducted air strikes on Bosnian Serb military targets. In response, Bosnian Serb forces allegedly took over 200 UN military observers and peacekeepers hostage between May 26 and June 19 of that year, including Rechner, and according to the prosecutor's pretrial brief, held them at "various locations in the [Bosnian Serb entity], using them as human shields and maltreating some of them".

Rechner told the court that prior to the events in May, his team lived and worked in the town of Pale, in a three-storey house about 300 metres from the headquarters of the Bosnian Serb presidency. Unlike some others, his group of military observers, UNMOs, did not go on patrol, but instead mainly worked as liaisons between the UN and the Bosnian Serb political and military leadership.

On the morning of May 26, Bosnian Serb soldiers entered their house, Rechner said. Before they saw him, Rechner said he managed to call a few people with whom he had been in frequent contact, including Karadzic's personal secretary and Jovan Zametica, Karadzic's senior political advisor. The secretary told him that the soldiers were sent "officially" while Zametica suggested Rechner be "as cooperative as possible".

At that point, Rechner said that his interpreters summoned him to the office where two Bosnian Serb soldiers were waiting, both of whom carried AK 47s. One of the soldiers, Nicholas Ribic, was a "Canadian of Serbian origin", Rechner had met before, he said.

Rechner contacted his headquarters via radio and said there were armed men in this office, and then "Ribic, who of course spoke perfect English as a Canadian, started making threats that he wanted the airstrikes called off".

Ribic's threats soon became more specific, Rechner said.

"[Ribic] said that if the bombing continues, we will execute the UNMOs, meaning myself and other two team members," Rechner recalled. "The threats got more specific to the point where [Ribic said] 'For the next bomb that falls, one UNMO will be killed'."

Ribic then called the office of General Rupert Smith, who was the commander of UN forces in Bosnia at the time, and made similar threats, Rechner said.

After that, Rechner said he and his colleagues were driven away to an ammunition depot known as Jahorinski Potok, a NATO target. During the journey, they were handcuffed to each other, he said, and once they arrived, they encountered an angry group of civilians.

"One of them then broke away from the crowd, came to our vehicle and opened the door and started punching and kicking me," Rechner said. "Unfortunately I had only one hand to defend myself [because of the handcuffs] so I got a few good punches and kicks in the process."

Bosnian Serb soldiers pulled the man off and he appeared to calm down, Rechner said, but then he took out a pistol. Once again, the soldiers took it away, but the man then grabbed Rechner by the throat, he said.

"[The man] said he had lost 12 sheep in the airstrike and he said that this was his livelihood," Rechner recalled, adding that the man also expressed fear that a missing relative had been killed in the airstrike that morning.

"He ended by saying that for those reasons he should be allowed to kill me and I shouldn't be surprised by his reaction," Rechner said. "I told him that we had nothing to do with the airstrikes, but he was too emotional and angry to discuss that issue."

When the group finally entered the facility, another Bosnian Serb soldier approached and took out a

revolver, Rechner said.

"[The soldier] pointed to two notches he had in the handle and he explained that those notches were for two people he had already killed with it," Rechner recalled. "And he said that if airstrikes would not kill us by the end of the day, he would come over and personally execute us, and he would really enjoy getting three more notches on his revolver handle, indicating that the three notches were for the three of us [military observers]."

Sometime later, Rechner said they received confirmation that the airstrikes had been called off, but shortly thereafter, there was yet another airstrike.

"It wasn't clear to any of us what real situation was—if airstrikes had been called off or not," Rechner said.

The group was then driven to four bunkers that had not yet been hit, Rechner said. The soldiers handcuffed him to one of the lightning rods in front of the bunkers, he said, adding that his two colleagues were subject to similar treatment.

Rechner said he remained handcuffed to the lightning rod for five to six hours, but was given a crate to sit on after a while. During this time, a group of people in civilian clothes came to visit the facility, one of whom was Zametica, the political advisor to Karadzic who in an earlier phone call had told Rechner to cooperate.

"Mr Zametica came over to me and I expressed to him my shock and surprise at how we were treated, because up to that point I had thought maybe there was some kind of mistake, that this was an out of control group that had taken us hostage," Rechner said.

"...I asked him what was going on and how he could justify this treatment of us, and I explained that I had been attacked and so on, and [Zametica] said, 'Well, times have changed'," Rechner continued. "And then in a self-satisfied way, he added a comment to himself, 'I wonder what General Smith will do now.' And then he walked up the road."

At around 5 pm, some Bosnian Serb soldiers unhandcuffed Rechner, blindfolded him, and took him and some other UNMOs for a drive up "a steep and bumpy" road, the witness said.

When the car stopped and his blindfold was taken off, Rechner said he found himself in front of a "large radar dome.

"Two of the soldiers took out AK47s, donned black masks and then [one of them] turned to us and asked if we were afraid, and I said no, trying to appear as calm as possible."

Prosecuting lawyer Alan Tieger then asked what Rechner thought would happen at that point.

"...When we were taken to the radar dome, my grave concern was that we were being taken there to be executed," Rechner replied. "Driving up the dirt track, one soldier turned to another and asked why they were going there, ... and the other soldier turned to him and said, 'Oh, it's because [General Ratko] Mladic wanted us to film some UN people there', so one of the possibilities was we were being taken there to be executed and filmed in the process."

That did not happen, and instead the soldiers took one of Rechner's colleagues up to the radar dome and "conducted some sort of interview" with him there.

After that, the day took an especially "bizarre" turn, Rechner said. He and his colleagues were taken to a hotel and treated to dinner "as if nothing at all had happened to us".

They were subsequently allowed to pick up blankets and provisions from their house in Pale, and Rechner was taken to a military garrison and reunited with other UNMOs.

"It was a very relieving situation to see that everyone was ok," Rechner said, his voice breaking with emotion.

Rechner also said that, according to his interpreters at the time, local newscasts had shown video footage of him handcuffed to the lightning rod and they "accused us of being the people on the ground who were guiding the airstrikes.

"[This] was not only false, but it infuriated us because accusations like that put our lives in danger, because local people had very little access to independent media and we were concerned that ... [they would] see these reports and take their angry and frustrations out on us."

Towards the end of his time in captivity, Rechner's repeated request for a meeting with Professor Nikola Koljevic, the vice-president of the self-declared Bosnian Serb entity and a close associate of Karadzic, was granted.

"I wanted to make sure Professor Koljevic understood everything [about how we were taken hostage]—he was bit surprised," Rechner said. "He knew about some of the details but not everything, that we had actually been threatened and how the whole situation had impacted on all of us."

Koljevic told Rechner that the airstrikes had been a "major crisis" for the Bosnian Serbs, and that the strikes had occurred prior to a deadline set by the UN for certain conditions to be met.

"He used the analogy of electric shock—sometimes if you treat a patient with electric shock you can kill him, but you can also cure him," Rechner recalled. "[Koljevic] said that from his point of view this was worth the risk."

When it was Karadzic's turn to cross-examine the witness, he spent several minutes asking about Rechner's status during his captivity.

"Were you ever told that you were prisoners of war?" Karadzic asked.

Rechner said that he was told this twice, but on one occasion he was referred to a "captive combatant".

"You as a group asked for certain rights and privileges, among other things, for visit from the Red Cross, from a doctor and to watch television, right?" Karadzic asked.

Rechner confirmed that they asked for those things, but emphasised that the request to watch television was so as to "receive information through the media".

"It was not because anyone called us prisoners of war, but because we considered it unjust to be taken captive," Rechner continued. "...We requested the minimum that we as a group were entitled to if the Bosnian Serb side designated us as prisoners of war, because we weren't getting any of that."

"You got all three [requests], didn't you?" Karadzic asked.

"Towards the end, yes," Rechner responded. "We made the requests early on."

Rechner said he also asked Koljevic for permission to make more frequent phone calls home, since the few that were permitted only lasted for one or two minutes at a time.

"You were in different theatres of war on behalf of the UN," Karadzic remarked. "Did you ever see POWs entitled to satellite phones or wireless communications? Does international law envisage that kind of thing?"

"Move on to the next question," presiding judge O-Gon Kwon interjected.

Karadzic concluded by thanking Rechner for his testimony.

"I'm sorry you went through what you went through, but I can't help thinking also of the Serbs who were there at the time suffering from NATO airstrikes."

The trial will continue next week with the testimony of General Rupert Smith, the commander of UN forces in Bosnia from January 1995 until the end of the conflict.

Rachel Irwin is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

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