

Vukovar Appeals Verdict Imminent

Author: [Simon Jennings](#)

Prosecutors are seeking tougher sentences against former Yugoslav army officers, while defence has called for acquittals.

Appeals judges will give their judgement next week in the case of two former Yugoslav People's Army, JNA, officers convicted for their role in the execution of nearly 200 prisoners of war following the fall of the Croatian town of Vukovar in 1991.

Mile Mrksic and Veselin Sljivancanin were sentenced by the Hague tribunal to jail terms of 20 and five years respectively in September 2007. Both the prosecution and defence appealed the verdicts and judges will deliver their decision on May 5.

Mrksic, a JNA colonel, was found guilty of three counts of violations of the laws or customs of war, including the murder, torture and cruel treatment of 194 Croat and other non-Serb prisoners at a farm near Ovcara on November 20 and 21, 1991.

The victims were transported by bus from Vukovar Hospital to Ovcara following the town's capture by JNA and Serb paramilitary forces.

Veselin Sljivancanin, a major in the JNA who served under Mrksic, was convicted of aiding and abetting the cruel treatment of the prisoners. Judges ruled at trial that Sljivancanin failed to allocate enough JNA guards to protect the prisoners and prevent local Serb paramilitaries abusing and mistreating them.

A third defendant who faced trial alongside the former officers, Miroslav Radic, was found not guilty after judges found there was no evidence he was aware of the killings taking place at Ovcara.

Trial judges dismissed all charges of crimes against humanity against the defendants because it ruled that all of the 194 victims identified were serving members of military forces rather than civilians.

Prosecutors appealed the sentences handed down to Mrksic and Sljivancanin on October 29, 2007, describing them as "manifestly inadequate".

They say that judges erred in identifying all the victims as non-civilian, and have called for stiffer sentences for both defendants. However, they did not appeal Radic's acquittal.

Mrksic and Sljivancanin, meanwhile, are seeking acquittal on all charges.

The appeals hearing took place on January 21 and 23, 2009.

On April 9, the appeals chamber issued a decision ordering Sljivancanin, who has been on provisional release from custody in The Hague since December 2007, to return for next week's judgement.

The trial judgement handed down on September 27, 2007, was met with huge criticism in Croatia where the sentences were seen as too lenient for what was the gravest crime to be committed on Croatian soil since the Second World War.

The trial of the defendants, the so-called Vukovar Three, began in October 2005 and concluded in March 2007. A total of 88 witnesses were heard and around 800 pieces of evidence were presented. At trial, prosecutors sought life sentences for all three defendants.

Simon Jennings is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

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