

## **Vukovar Hospital Inmates Spirited Away**

**Author:** [Goran Jungvirth](#)

Diplomat says Yugoslav military went back on its word and removed people from Vukovar hospital before the international community could stop it.

A high-ranking Czech diplomat this week told the Hague tribunal how Yugoslav army forces were in full control of the city of Vukovar in late 1991, the period when three former officers stand accused of responsibility for the deaths of 264 people.

Petr Kypr, who was appearing in court for the prosecution, was at the time attached to the European Community Monitoring Mission, ECMM, in Zagreb.

He and other international observers made trips to Vukovar to monitor the evacuation of wounded, sick and other civilians from the city, which the Yugoslav People's Army, JNA, captured on November 18, 1991, after months of fighting.

Former JNA officers Veselin Sljivancanin, Mile Mrksic and Miroslav Radic stand accused of having command responsibility over soldiers who are alleged to have killed at least 264 Croatians taken from Vukovar's hospital, in one of the worst atrocities of the war in Croatia.

The three defendants are charged with being part of a joint criminal enterprise whose purpose was "the persecution of Croats or other non-Serbs who were present in Vukovar hospital after the fall of Vukovar".

The ECMM observers came to Vukovar with Red Cross representatives to oversee the evacuation, under an agreement signed by General Andrija Raseta, the JNA's principal negotiator with the Croatian government, which agreed that everyone could be taken safely from the hospital.

When they arrived, Kypr said, the "JNA completely controlled the hospital, they were sovereign in that area, but there was no one who commanded".

The witness recalled that on November 20, two days after the city was captured, Red Cross staff complained to him that they had been prevented from evacuating some 300 to 400 injured civilians, and that many people had been already taken away from the hospital by JNA soldiers.

Although the ECMM took immediate action through European Community member governments, things were already happening on the ground. According to Kypr, before the observer mission could get to the site, "around 60 wounded people were taken out of the hospital".

"Their trace was lost afterwards," said the witness.

Although the agreement signed by General Raseta stated that "all wounded and sick who can move" would be evacuated, Kypr alleged that the JNA command structure in Vukovar reinterpreted the terms so that some of the patients at the hospital would be considered prisoners of war, POWs.

JNA commanders first alleged that the hospital inmates included numbers of Croatian soldiers when they met the ECMM delegation at their headquarters at Negoslavci on November 18. According to Kypr, one of the senior officers present at this meeting - either Sljivancanin or Colonel Nebojsa Pavkovic, the commander of Operational Group South, warned that members of Serb paramilitary Territorial Defence would not allow any Croatian National Guardsmen to be evacuated from the hospital.

The officers said the Territorial Defence members were threatening to “execute” anyone - even JNA soldiers or ECMM team members - who went ahead with the evacuation.

The following day, Colonel Pavkovic, commanding the JNA force holding Vukovar, said POWs at the hospital would be exchanged for captured Serbs rather than being allowed to leave. Pavkovic said this change of plan had been coordinated with General Raseta, the witness told the court.

Kypr subsequently learned that JNA men had taken around 300 people from the hospital. Prosecutors say 264 people were taken to a nearby farm at Ovcara where they were killed on the night of November 20-21.

Sljivancanin’s defence lawyer Novak Lukic insisted that individuals whom the JNA took from the Vukovar hospital “were not patients at all”.

Lukic also addressed an incident in which Sljivancanin is said to have prevented Red Cross delegation leader Nicolas Borsinger from getting to the hospital. The verbal clash, at a roadblock on the Vuka river, was recorded on camera.

But the defence claims that Pavkovic, not Sljivancanin, had denied the Red Cross access to the hospital before the argument at the bridge took place. In evidence, Lukic produced a document in which Kypr cited the exchange with Pavkovic.

However, the witness continued to insist on the importance of the later exchange involving the accused Sljivancanin, “What I remember now is that the discussion took place between Major Sljivancanin and the representative of the Red Cross. No matter what I wrote in the report; what is written is written, but I remember this.”

Along with their witness, prosecutors presented the court with documentary evidence in the form of ECMM reports.

The documents allege that the JNA had a deliberate plan to “displace as many Croatians [as possible] from the Vukovar area”.

They also say local Serb irregular troops were used in “first strikes” during JNA operations around JNA. The implication of a close operation link between the two forces runs contrary to the defence’s position that Serb paramilitaries may have been responsible for the Ovcara massacre, but they were not under the direct command of the JNA.

In cross-examination, defence lawyers for the accused men also cited ECMM documents, but they picked

different material to support their own version of events.

Mrksic's defence counsel Miroslav Vasic cited one document as saying that during the hospital evacuation, "JNA soldiers helped elderly people", and that "one woman close to giving birth was transported rapidly through the checkpoints."

Goran Jungvirth is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

**Location:** Croatia

**Topic:** Courtside

**Focus:** International Criminal Tribunal for the former  
Yugoslavia

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/vukovar-hospital-inmates-spirited-away>