

Witness Says Belgrade Sent Army to Sarajevo

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He claims special unit came to capital to transport bodies of dead Yugoslav army soldiers home. A former senior officer in the Yugoslav Army, VJ, testified this week that orders sending him to Sarajevo during the Bosnian war could only have come from the defendant, ex-Yugoslav army chief Momcilo Perisic.

The witness, General Borivoje Tescic, told the Hague tribunal that his unit had pushed into a suburb of Sarajevo in December 1993 following orders passed on from his commander Miodrag Panic.

After wondering aloud whether Panic would have had the authority to send VJ troops into independent Bosnia, prosecutor Ann Sutherland asked Tescic specifically who would have issued the original order.

“I suppose it would have come from the general staff,” replied Tescic.

“And who was the highest-ranking officer?” asked Sutherland.

“The chief of the general staff was General Perisic,” said the witness.

Tescic’s testimony supported the prosecution’s assertion that the VJ – headed by Perisic – was active in Sarajevo during the 44-month siege of the city.

Prosecutors allege that the accused secretly provided officers, weapons, fuel and logistical assistance to Bosnian Serb forces during relentless shelling and sniper attacks that killed thousands of civilians.

Perisic, head of the VJ from 1993 to 1998, is charged with 13 counts of crimes against humanity and violations of the laws of war, including the aiding and abetting of murder and inhumane attacks against civilians from 1993 to 1995 during the siege of Sarajevo and shelling of Zagreb, and in the 1995 Srebrenica massacre.

According to the indictment, Perisic allegedly acted in secret, since VJ military involvement in the Bosnian and Croatian conflicts was in breach of United Nations Security Council resolutions, and because “such assistance was being used in the commission of crimes” on civilians.

The defendant is also accused of setting up special personnel centres “to disguise the provision and payment” of VJ officers stationed in Bosnia and Croatia.

Tescic was an operations officer in the VJ Guards Brigade special unit at the end of 1993, when Sarajevo was under siege by the Bosnian Serbs.

He told the Hague tribunal that the purpose of the December 30, 1993, mission to the Sarajevo suburb of Vogosca was to “help pull out the 72nd special brigade” of the VJ from the area and transport eight dead soldiers back to Belgrade.

The prosecutor questioned Tesic about the “war diary” kept by the Guards Brigade and any contact the unit had with VJ headquarters in Belgrade during the Vogosca mission.

“We sent daily reports [to Belgrade] in the morning hours and evening hours,” said Tesic.

He added that the unit was “duty bound” to record all operations “minute by minute” in the war diary, and that he contributed to the documentation himself.

“Was it protocol for this information to be passed further up the chain of command?” asked Sutherland.

“I suppose so, yes,” said Tesic, who appeared calm and solemn during questioning.

In the course of his testimony, he also confirmed the existence of snipers in his unit at the time of the Vogosca mission, and said that his unit probably trained them.

Sutherland wondered if it was normal for a short mission to employ 120 men and an abundance of heavy, armoured equipment.

“We found [the tanks] there [in Vogosca],” answered Tesic. “The rest of the weaponry was normally in possession of the army.”

He also said that all of the VJ soldiers wore their own uniforms during the mission, and claimed he never heard of any orders to the contrary.

“Were you ordered to remove the insignia of the VJ?” asked Sutherland.

“I don’t know,” replied Tesic. “I don’t remember if I even wore insignia.”

Nearly all of the witness’s testimony – for the prosecution and defence – was given in closed session, due to the confidential nature of the various documents discussed.

The trial continues next week.

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