

## **Witness Says Praljak Tried to Control Soldiers**

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Court hears that suspect spoke to soldiers about the rules of war.

A witness in the trial of former Croatian general Slobodan Praljak told the Hague tribunal this week that the defendant had tried to instil discipline among his soldiers throughout the conflict in Bosnia and Hercegovina.

Dragan Curcic, a retired Bosnian army, BH, general and a former commander of the Ludvig Pavlovic unit of the Croatian Defence Council, HVO, told the tribunal that Praljak had led by example.

Praljak is on trial for war crimes along with other five high-ranking Bosnian Croat officials: Jadranko Prlic, Bruno Stojic, Milivoj Petkovic, Valentin Coric and Berislav Pusic.

The six are accused of responsibility for the expulsion, rape, torture and murder of Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and other non-Croats between late 1991 and early 1994, as part of an alleged plan to ethnically cleanse parts of Bosnia in order to later join them to a so-called Greater Croatia.

According to the indictment, Praljak served during the conflict as Zagreb's liaison to the HVO and the government and armed forces of the Bosnian Croats' self-proclaimed state of Herceg-Bosna, relaying instructions from the then Croatian president Franjo Tudjman and other officials.

The indictment says that Praljak exercised control over the wartime statelet's armed forces, and was responsible for logistics, organisation, planning, training and deployment, as well as strategic and combat orders.

Defence lawyer Nika Pinter asked whether Praljak had made clear how he expected his soldiers to treat prisoners and the enemy, recalling Curcic's previous testimony about the takeover of the Yugoslav People's Army, JNA, barracks in Capljina at the beginning of the war.

"You said that one of your soldiers slapped an imprisoned JNA member. And how the general yelled because of this, and how you and Bozan (another HVO commander) said that no one can touch anybody. First, I'm going to ask you - who is the general that you had in mind?" asked Pinter.

"I thought about general Praljak," replied Curcic.

The defendant has said that no regular units of the Croatian army were present in Bosnia during the war, and that his own role in the HVO did not prove any connection as his service had been "voluntary".

The witness also said that commanders, himself included, had tried to set an example to the non-professional troops of the proper behaviour for soldiers.

Pinter asked Curcic to describe the clash between Croatian and Bosniak fighters in Busovaca on January 25, 1993 - a battle in which his own younger brother was killed.

The witness recounted that he himself had given female prisoners cigarettes, and said that "no one can touch anybody and if there are any wounded to take them to hospital".

The witness said that on many occasions Praljak had made particular efforts to raise his soldiers' morale, even reciting pieces by the Russian classical author Leo Tolstoy.

"We would look at each other and burst into laughter," Curcic recalled.

Praljak used the opportunity to personally ask the witness some questions.

"Did we, Mr General, talk on a regular basis during the war and direct those boys (soldiers) and everybody else attending the meetings? Did I do it personally - regarding how war should and should not be conducted?" he said.

"Yes, you did direct. On an official and on private basis as well," replied Curcic.

However, during cross-examination, the prosecution presented the command ordering Curcic's former unit to arrest all Capljina Bosniak men able to serve in the military, at the end of June and during July 1993.

"I participated in those arrests. I'm not running from it," the witness said, while denying that he was aware of the intimidation and arrest of Bosniak women.

Curcic replied that he knew of only one case when a Bosniak member of his unit had come to him asking for help to protect his mother.

But the prosecution alleged that Curcic's subsequent request to Capljina police to exclude the soldier's mother from mistreatment and arrest confirmed that he was aware that women were being taken away from their homes.

"You claim it like you were there. I was there and I wasn't aware that this was happening," replied the witness.

After further questioning, Curcic confirmed that Bosnian women were taken away, but continued to insist that he had not witnessed it himself.

The trial will continue on October 26.

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