

Witness Testifies on Army and Police Campaigns in Kosovo

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International monitor says “joint control post” coordinated Yugoslav army and Serb police actions. A British international peacekeeper told The Hague war crimes tribunal this week how the Yugoslav army worked closely with Serbian police in the run-up to the ethnic cleansing of Albanians from Kosovo in 1999.

General Karol John Drewienkiewicz, the chief of operations of the Kosovo Verification Mission, KVM, was testifying at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, ICTY, in the trial of former Serbian police chief Vlastimir Djordjevic.

Run by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the KVM was tasked with monitoring the compliance of both Serb authorities and the guerilla Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA, with the ceasefire agreement of October 1998.

Djordjevic, formerly head of the public security department of the Serbian ministry of internal affairs, MUP, is accused of engaging in criminal activity that ultimately caused the ceasefire to collapse and the conflict to escalate in 1999, resulting in thousands of deaths and the expulsion of approximately 800,000 ethnic Albanians.

The prosecution alleges Djordjevic took part in a “widespread or systematic campaign of terror and violence that included deportations, murders, forcible transfers and persecutions directed at the Kosovo Albanian population” between about January and June 1999. He has denied that there was a campaign aimed at “the modification of the ethnic balance of Kosovo”, saying Serb forces acted legitimately to stop separatists aiming to carve out an independent Kosovo.

Using a series of KVM reports and correspondence to supplement Drewienkiewicz’s testimony, the prosecution pieced together a picture of the close relationship between the Yugoslav army, VJ, and MUP in Kosovo in 1998 and 1999.

Although formally Djordjevic was head of MUP, the prosecution alleges that he is responsible for crimes committed by “forces of the Former Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbia” which includes not only the MUP, but also the VJ, and all forces under their control. Demonstrating close ties between MUP and VJ forces on the ground in Kosovo is central to the prosecution’s case.

Drewienkiewicz began his testimony explaining that even before his deployment to Kosovo there was a lot of speculation about who was in charge in the field where MUP and VJ were both present.

“We had gone [to Kosovo] convinced that there were separate chains of command for the MUP and the VJ, which is really what you’d expect,” he told the tribunal. Upon arrival he began “seeing evidence on the ground that the VJ and the MUP were patrolling together”.

On December 18, 1998, VJ armoured units set out on a tank driving exercise that, according to Drewienkiewicz, triggered hostilities in which the VJ and MUP engaged in joint command operations.

“The route [of the tank training exercise] that was described to me by [VJ] General [Dusan] Loncar ... was going to take them west of Podujevo into [an area where] ... we were all aware that the KLA were becoming active,” he said.

In light of the KLA activity, Drewienkiewicz attempted to persuade Loncar to reroute the training exercise to the east of Podujevo.

Loncar was unyielding. The VJ “did go on their driver training exercise as indicated, they did get shot at [by the KLA], and they did respond with tank main armament”, Drewienkiewicz said.

He added that “this [offensive] was probably the trigger for the subsequent operation that took place on the 24th of December”.

According to a statement that Drewienkiewicz gave the tribunal investigators in 2000, on December 24, 1998 an armoured Serb column came out of Pristina and stormed the area west of Podujevo.

The prosecution quoted this statement as saying, “The VJ and MUP were not travelling separate, parts of the column were rather evenly mixed throughout the convoy”, and then asked Drewienkiewicz of its significance.

“If you are putting together a column [of vehicles and platoons] ... the way that it goes together tends to be A followed by B followed by C,” he said.

“So if you suddenly find that the MUP are spread throughout the column, it indicates that this isn’t a unit that has just joined the group [but rather] a series of police detachments, each of which is closely affiliated to one of the sub-units of the VJ,” he said.

Drewienkiewicz suggested “one of the reasons you might do that is so that [sub-units of] the VJ have a MUP vehicle with them so that the VJ and the MUP can communicate together in an operation where both have a part”.

Seeking to demonstrate a pattern of coordinated campaigns between VJ and MUP forces, the prosecution then turned to the offensive on Racak of January 15, 1999, one of the single bloodiest incidents of the Kosovo conflict with an estimated 45 people killed.

Drewienkiewicz explained how the incursion unfolded. From their position in the hills overlooking the village, the VJ first fired heavy weapons into the centre of Racak, and then they switched and began targeting the flanks of the village.

Once the VJ had retrained their weapons away from the centre of Racak, “while firing was still going on, the MUP went into the village”, he said.

“This is not the sort of coordination that you do casually,” Drewienkiewicz said. “You would be very specific

in saying that the tanks will now switch their fire so that they fire nothing to the right of a certain point and you will be going in on the other side of that point.”

This operation “required a very high degree of control”, he said. “It must have been properly planned and there must have been joint control post controlling it. You simply couldn’t do it otherwise.”

In an effort to further demonstrate the closely linked chains of command of the VJ and MUP, the prosecution then asked Drewienkiewicz about a raid on a KLA compound in Rogovo reported by the Prizren regional centre of the KVM on January 29, 1999.

Drewienkiewicz explained what happened, saying that a farm alleged to be a KLA safe house “was stormed by a special police unit [of MUP] in the early hours of the morning”, and all 24 Albanians present were killed.

Arriving at the compound in Rogovo hours after the incident, Drewienkiewicz recalled that General Loncar was already there, “[Loncar] came outside of the compound when it was reported to him that I arrived, and then he accompanied me into the compound when it was determined that I could go inside.”

According to Drewienkiewicz, “Loncar was clearly in charge of what was a police operation, or at least a police-led operation.”

In cross-examination, the defence challenged the authenticity of the materials that Drewienkiewicz had referred to in writing the initial statement that he gave to ICTY investigators. Drewienkiewicz answered that he kept a personal archive of his notes and KVM reports, and that this collection of documents had never left his possession.

The trial is scheduled to continue next week.

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