

Witnesses Allege Crimes Committed in Serbia

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A string of witnesses say Yugoslav army was directly involved in abuses, sometimes inside Serbia.

During the first two weeks of December, prosecutors in the Milosevic case have produced a string of witnesses to show not only that Yugoslav army soldiers were involved in committing war crimes in Bosnia, but that some of these crimes were committed inside Serbia.

These testimonies could prove extremely damning to Slobodan Milosevic, because they appear to undermine what has been the cornerstone of his defence – that Serbia did not have a hand in any of the atrocities that took place in Bosnia.

Some of the most incriminating evidence came from Sulejman Tihic, a current member of the tripartite Bosnian presidency. Tihic, a lawyer from Bosanski Samac, was elected president of the region's Muslim-dominated Party of Democratic Action, SDA, in 1992.

Testifying on December 2, Tihic told the court that in April 1992, a group of Serb paramilitary units, including the Red Berets, Zeljko "Arkan" Raznatovic's Tigers and the Grey Wolves, took over the town and were later joined by local territorial defence troops as well as soldiers of the Yugoslav army, JNA.

Tihic claimed that the decision to attack Bosanski Samac came from Belgrade, saying that local Bosnian Serb officials were in constant contact with the authorities in Serbia.

When the paramilitaries arrived, Tihic was immediately taken prisoner.

"The special units were masters of that war, of life and death," he recalled. "They beat us up so badly that people [the other villagers] were worried we would die."

The paramilitaries terrorised the village for ten days before the JNA intervened to take control.

"At first I felt relieved," Tihic said. "At that time I still believed in the JNA. I found it comfortable to think you were registered somewhere. It seemed an improvement compared with the atmosphere of the [paramilitary] special units in my village."

The JNA took Tihic to the nearby military barracks in Brcko, then moved him a week later to Bijelina. In both places, he said he was severely beaten and maltreated. Then, on May 2 or 3, he and several others were transported to Batajnica, a military airfield in Serbia just outside Belgrade.

"They called out some names, blindfolded us and put us in a JNA helicopter," he said, adding that they were guarded by one of Arkan's men and a major in civilian clothes.

Peeping over his blindfold, Tihic recognised the helicopter as a JNA aircraft. "Which unit I could not tell. We had to keep our heads down all the time," he said.

The guards in Batajnica, he said, were all young JNA recruits, no older than 18. They forced the prisoners to sing Serbian songs and beat them with knuckledusters. The prisoners were also forced to perform sexual acts on each other.

During cross-examination, Milosevic asked Tihic if he was sure that the guards were from the Yugoslav military.

“Yes, I was beaten by members of the JNA,” Tihic responded. “I found it incredible too. Children – regular soldiers – beat me because of my name.”

At the end of May, Tihic said he was transported to Sremska Mitrovica, also in Serbia. Tihic said he had heard at the time that Sremska Mitrovica was “the worst concentration camp”, and he was beaten again. He said he and the other inmates received very little food and were subjected to forced labour.

“In [Sremska] Mitrovica we were beaten after breakfast, lunch and dinner. I have never been beaten as much as I’ve been beaten there,” he said. “It was an enormous change from the JNA prison camp in Brcko and the JNA camp in Mitrovica. It was a camp – a concentration camp.”

Tihic was released on August 14, when he was exchanged at Nemetin, a town in Croatia, along with several Croatian prisoners from Vukovar.

A few days after Tihic gave his testimony, another witness, known to the public only B-1770, said that he too was held in Sremska Mitrovica. He said that he was beaten and maltreated, and given so little food that he lost more than 30 kilos.

On December 9, the prosecution called witness B-1011, who shed further detail on how the JNA cooperated with paramilitary troops.

B-1011, who came from Brcko, said that the JNA armed the Serb paramilitaries in mid April 1992, handing out weapons from their garrison. Then on May 1, all of the bridges in the area were destroyed and paramilitaries took control of the town.

B-1011 was immediately taken prisoner, interrogated and released. Two and a half months later, he was arrested again and imprisoned in Batkovic, a camp near Bijeljina.

Finally, a witness named Mehmed Music, who lived in the village of Mocici just outside Sarajevo, testified that the JNA was involved in his capture and imprisonment as well.

Music said that his village was attacked on May 20. He and many others, including women and children, were locked up in the local sports hall where they were interrogated and beaten.

Music said he recognised Arkan’s men in the sports hall, and said that many of the other paramilitaries had accents indicating they were from Serbia.

Later, Music said he was transferred to a prison camp in Lukavica, a barracks just outside Sarajevo which was run by the Red Berets, an infamous paramilitary group, jointly with the JNA.

“We were forced to run the gauntlet between Red Berets,” Music said. “We were beaten as we ran.”

His brother and two uncles were killed in the camp.

Although all the testimony pointed to the JNA being involved both in ethnic cleansing and in mistreating prisoners – and could therefore be extremely damaging to Milosevic’s defence – the former Serbian president did not seek to refute the evidence presented.

Instead, he tried either to discredit the witnesses by proving them wrong on points of detail, or to engage them in political debate.

In one instance, he tried to confuse witness B-1011 about the identity of one of the Serb paramilitaries, Captain Dragan.

While questioning Tihic, Milosevic asked what the witness thought about the name given to the Serb-run part of Bosnia, Republika Srpska.

Not for the first time, Judge Richard May cut Milosevic off, telling him that if he did not intend to use the time to question the witnesses about their testimony, the session would end.

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