

WITNESS STATEMENT – RUKEJA, IBRO, SUAD, SULEJMAN AND ELVIR DIKONJA

The Dikonja Family's statement was given to the Humanitarian Law Center (HLC) on 17 March 1993 in the Kirklareli refugee camp, Turkey.

Researcher: Filip Švarm

Description of the Dikonja Family's testimony:

Ibro and Rukeja Dikonja, and their daughter and three sons, lived in the settlement of Donje Polje in Foča. When Serb forces entered the settlement on 26 or 27 April 1992, the family took refuge in the basement of the Kovač brothers, where 18 Muslims and seven Serbs were hiding. After two days, having heard that Arkan's Men ("Arkanovci") were coming, some of them headed towards the hospital. Along the way, two Bosniaks were arrested by local Serb soldiers and taken to the Foča KP Dom. In a group of about a hundred Bosniaks and Serbs, Ibro, Rukeja and the children headed towards the city centre. Volunteers from Serbia and Montenegro (the "Serbian Guard") placed everyone in the "Zelengora" Hotel. They mixed ethnicities between themselves in the rooms, in order to avoid a room with only Bosniaks in it. After two days, the paramilitaries told them that they could return to Donje Polje. Their house had been burned down, so Ibro, Rukeja and the children slept at their cousin Vejsil Delić's place; during the day they stayed with another cousin Bećir Dikonja. On June 7, Serb soldier Novica Tripković, drunk and in possession of a baseball bat, entered the house of a 75-year-old Bosniak woman who lived alone. After his departure, they found her dead, and concluded from her clothes that she had been raped. Tripković was reported to the police, who arrived to conduct an investigation, but did nothing. Novica Tripković then reappeared on June 24, and killed Vejsil Delić. Rukeja went to the police to ask for permission to move out, but ran away when the officer asked her, "How come your husband and sons are not in the KP Dom". The Kovač brothers lodged them again. Neighbour Branko Blagojević also defended them from Serb soldiers. The Dikonja family left Foča on 13 August 1992, with ICRC permits. The next day, the last Bosniaks left Foča in an organised convoy.

Dikonja Family:

Name: Rukeja Dikonja (mother)

Father's Name: Smail

Year of Birth: 1951

Occupation: housewife

Name: Ibro Dikonja (father)

Father's Name: Sulejman

Year of Birth: 1940

Occupation: worker

Name: Suad Dikonja (son)

Father's Name: Ibro

Year of Birth: 1970

Occupation: worker

Name: Sulejman Dikonja (son)

Father's Name: Ibro

Year of Birth: 1972

Occupation: worker

Name: Elvir Dikonja (son)

Father's Name: Ibro

Year of Birth: 1974

Occupation: student

Name: Senada Dikonja (daughter)

Father's Name: Ibro

Year of Birth: 1983

Occupation: student

Address: Donje Polje; Foča

Statements

RUKEJA: Before the outbreak of the war in Foča, the atmosphere was tense. Shots would often resound at night. Both Serbs and Muslims kept watches - at least in that part of town where I lived. Grenades, fired from the surrounding hills, started to fall on Foča on 8 April 1992. We spent this whole day and the following days hiding in basements. Muslims, mostly the wealthier ones, were already leaving the city. The rest of us - we had nowhere to go. The older sons, SULEJMAN and SUAD, as well as another group of Muslim men, were forced to take up arms. They were forced to do this by the Muslims who presented themselves as the headquarters of our army, but in fact were only interested in their personal benefit.

SUAD: It was around April 20, when some old guns were given to SULEJMAN and me. No one was in command and everything was completely disorganised. We didn't fire a single bullet - we were just hiding in houses and basements.

RUKEJA: The Muslims in Donje Polje surrendered on April 26 or 27. My sons hadn't come to the basement for three days, and that evening I went to look for them. But when I found them, the Serbs had already taken control everywhere, so it was impossible to even think about leaving the city. The next morning, on the 26th or 27th of April, I'm not sure which, the Serb army and the Chetniks (mostly from Foča) would go around Donje Polje, looking for Muslims and burning down their houses. In the basement where we were hiding, there were the following people:

ŠEĆA ČERIMOVIĆ

AZIZ SIRBUBALO

NEDIB KRKALIĆ (son)

RASIM KRKALIĆ (father)

SALE ČAUŠEVIĆ

IZO ČAUŠEVIĆ

HAFA ČAUŠEVIĆ (disabled female)

VEJSIL DELIĆ
DAMIR DELIĆ
and our family DIKONJA

IBRO: When they surrounded the basement where we were, they started shouting:

- Surrender, Ustashas, we won't hurt you!

We were scared - no one knew what to do. However, NEDO KOVAČ, whose basement we were in, came down and said:

- You have to go out and let them see you. Everything will be fine.

We went out, they lined us up and start cursing the Serbs (referring to the KOVAČ brothers - NEDO, RATKO, STOJAN and RADOMIR, and their mother MILKA, and their wives JELA, DANA and MARINA) who were keeping the Muslims. Then they searched all the people. They threatened us with rifles, too. Their commander (I don't know him, but I think he's from Foča) said:

- Everybody go back to the basement! If any of the Muslims shoot at us, we will kill you all. You must not leave the basement!

We entered the basement again - we 18 Muslims and 7 Serbs.

An hour passed, the Chetniks returned again. The commander addressed us:

- Run anywhere you can, Arkan's Men are coming - they will slaughter you all.

ŠEĆA ĆERIMOVIĆ, RASIM KRKALIĆ, ĐENAN KARABEGOVIĆ and AZIZ SIRBUBALO departed for the hospital. However, only ŠEĆA got there. RASIM and AZIZ were caught on the way and taken to KP DOM.

RUKEJA: The rest of us headed for the skyscraper. We arrived and found around a hundred Serbs and Muslims, who made us tea. We spent an hour there.

- People - said one Serb - we must not stay here anymore. Let's go to the city centre.

We left. About a hundred Serbs and Muslims. We are on our way and we arrive to the JNA Club. Volunteers from Montenegro and Serbia stop us there. They ask if there are Muslims among us.

- Yes there are, we answer.

- Separate!, they order.

- We won't separate!

And they didn't separate us. After searching us, they escorted us all together to the "FOČA" Hotel.

IBRO: They put us in the rooms. The Serbs who were with us were distributed in such a way that there was not a single room with Muslims only. We watched the city burn through the window. When it got dark, the paramilitaries brought us candles. They had previously given us food, cigarettes and juices. We spent two days at the "Foča". On the third day, one of their commanders came and said:

- Go to Donje Polje, if you have somewhere to go!

We go and stop by at the KOVAČ brothers (all four brothers lived in a big house). Their mother MILKA, when she saw us, started crying:

- Arkan's Men and some neighbours were looking for you to kill you!

We became scared and decided to head for USTIKOLINA. We didn't go because there were Chetniks on the bridge, so it was impossible to cross, and in the meantime, USTIKOLINA was had also become occupied.

RUKEJA: Our house had burned down! We had nowhere to live, so we stayed with our sister-in-law HASNIJA and Uncle VEJSIL DELIĆ. More precisely, we slept at his place, and during the day, we stayed in the neighbouring house of our uncle, BEĆIR DIKONJA.

SUAD: On April 30, A1 came from the hospital. She had been placed there because she was wounded during the fights. She told us that NOVICA TRIPKOVIĆ had mistreated her in the first days when she returned home. She didn't say if he had raped her, but I guess he did, since he spent one night in her house. He would later return with the intention of raping her, but A1 would manage to escape each time.

SULEJMAN: NOVICA TRIPKOVIĆ, totally plastered, came to NEĐA KOVAČ's place on June 7, armed and with a baseball bat - I watched everything through the window. They started arguing. On his departure, TRIPKOVIĆ shouted at KOVAČ:

- When I beat them, don't interfere, 'cos I'll fuck you up!

I watched TRIPKOVIĆ walking down the alley. He went into the house of 75-year-old XXXXXXXXX. She had spent her whole life alone - she never got married. I didn't see him coming out, but after a while, the neighbours found XXXXXXXXX dead and raped (her skirt was up and she was half naked). The police came and conducted an investigation. Although both Serbs and Muslims said she was killed by NOVICA TRIPKOVIĆ, the police did nothing. They said they knew it, then they left.

SUAD: It was the same with A1. Once, TRIPKOVIĆ broke into her house and found her at dinner. He stamped on the pie with his foot and headed towards A1. She managed to grab a steel poker, push him away with it, and escape. After that, she was afraid to go home, and she slept with us at VEJSIL's. Afterwards, she reported everything to the police. The police told her to be careful. According to TRIPKOVIĆ, they did nothing.

SULEJMAN: Uncle VEJSIL, 50 years of age, was at uncle BEĆIR DIKONJA's place on June 8. When he was on his way home, he was met by 25-year-old ZDRAVKO MATOVIĆ. MATOVIĆ was wearing a uniform and was armed.

- What are you holding in your hands?, MATOVIĆ shouted.

VEJSIL, walking with his hands behind his back, showed his hands and showed his empty fists.

- Nothing, he said.

- What's that in your pocket?

- A small transistor so I can listen to the news.

As soon as VEJSIL said that, MATOVIĆ punched him in the stomach.

- Why are you doing this to us?, said our uncle, writhing.

- We rape, slaughter and kill Ustashas!, MATOVIĆ answered and left.

We watched all this from VEJSIL's yard.

ELVIR: A few days after this event, I was hanging around with my Serb peers. It was raining.

- Run! they told me at one point, MATOVIĆ is coming!

I started to run.

- Stop that kid!, I heard behind me, Anything could happen!

I stopped. I approached Matović. The thirteen-year-old ŽIKA held handcuffs in his hands. MATOVIĆ took the handcuffs from him and put them on my wrists. He tightened them like hell - I had scars for seven days.

- Where did your dad hide his rifle?, he asked.

- My dad doesn't have a rifle, I replied.
- Where did your neighbour VEHBİJA hide his rifle?
- How do I know?
- Where is your neighbour ESAD PECA?
- I don't know.

Then MATOVIĆ takes out his knife.

- How the hell don't you know?, he snaps.
 - I don't know, I'm not guilty! I begin to cry.
 - If you touch him, you're dead! I hear and then see my neighbour OBRAD (I don't know his last name - he used to work as a forester) holding a 6.35 mm pistol. - Untie his handcuffs!
- MATOVIĆ takes off my handcuffs, I run away, and the two of them stay arguing.

SULEJMAN: It was peaceful until June 24. Then NOVICA TRIPKOVIĆ killed Uncle VEJSIL DELIĆ. SUAD and I used to play Yahtzee at his house...

RUKEJA: The rest of us - IBRO, ELVIR, SENADA and I - were at Uncle BEĆIR's. I'm sitting by the window. IBRO is lying down on the couch. ELVIR is pouring oil into the lighter. We hear a male voice in the street. I look out the window and see NOVICA TRIPKOVIĆ coming. We get scared and all jump from the first floor. I throw SENADA myself. Anything is better than falling into TRIPKOVIĆ's hands.

IBRO: I jump awkwardly and break my leg. I stay lying down. I watch RUKEJA and the children fleeing across the meadow to VEJSIL's house. TRIPKOVIĆ fires from an automatic rifle several times above them. He approaches me, and I tell him:

- Don't kill us!

He doesn't even look at me, but goes after RUKEJA and the children.

RUKEJA: We are running across the meadow and hear TRIPKOVIĆ shouting "Stop!". I think he has killed IBRA and I cry. We run inside VEJSIL's house...

SULEJMAN: I look out the window. TRIPKOVIĆ stands in front of the yard and curses our "Balija mothers". Uncle VEJSIL comes out.

- You're hiding her, TRIPKOVIĆ tells him, approaching. He was referring to A1, who he was chasing after and who was constantly eluding him.

- I am not. She is not here, replies VEJSIL, lying.

TRIPKOVIĆ fires twice from his pistol. Neighbour NEDO KOVAČ goes out onto the balcony with his "Thompson" (a type of automatic rifle) and yells:

- Don't shoot!

TRIPKOVIĆ takes a hand grenade and aims at the balcony where NEDO and his mother MILKA are standing.

- Go inside the house!, he shouts.

MILKA enters, and NEDO puts down his "Thompson". VEJSIL stands and rolls a cigarette. He hasn't managed to finish rolling it...

- Can't have two crosses together!, says TRIPKOVIĆ, as he turns round and fires a gun into VEJSIL's temple. He collapses without a sound. We have all watched all this from a window no more than ten metres away. After the murder, TRIPKOVIĆ went into town. We heard that he killed seven more people that day.

SUAD: We panicked. Our mother started getting us passes for moving out...

RUKEJA: I came to the police.

- Who do you have?, the clerk asked me.

- A husband, three sons and a daughter, I replied.

- How come they're not in the KP Dom?

I got scared and ran away. We no longer knew what to do. The KOVAČ brothers received us in their house. They put us in a yard building - thirteen of us. They also helped us with food, and sometimes we all helped them cultivate the nearby field. Together with us there were HASNIJA DELIĆ, RAZA (mother) and JASNA SIRBUBALO (daughter) (both wounded in April and released from hospital at the end of June), and some other neighbours whose houses were burned down. In addition to the KOVAČ brothers, BRANKO BLAGOJEVIĆ also protected us - he chased off a Chetnik gang with a gun several times.

On July 28, JASNA and I went to the Red Cross and asked for passes. They gave them to us without any problem. On our way home, we met ZDRAVKO MATOVIĆ.

- What's up?, he asked JASNA.

That same evening, at around 23:00, he broke into HASNIJA DELIĆ's home (she had returned home meanwhile). MOMO IVANOVIĆ was with him. They said they were looking for Ustashas, but in fact they wanted to rape JASNA. They thought she was sleeping at HASNIJA's. When they didn't find her, they went to SALEM ČAUŠEVIĆ. They were looking for money there. They put a gun to his disabled mother's head. They robbed him and left.

We left Foča on August 13, thanks to the permits we received from the Red Cross.