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Bosnia-Herzegovina: Blaskic trial, a milestone in the achievement of justice for war crimes

Amnesty International welcomed the bringing to justice of General Tihomir Blaskic for war crimes and crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia today as a milestone in the achievement of justice for the victims of war crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

He was convicted on all but one of 20 charges against him and sentenced to 45 years' imprisonment, the highest sentence imposed so far, reflecting the gravity of the crimes committed and the accused's status as a commander.

Charges against him included the organization of the persecution of Bosnian Muslims through systematic attacks on cities, towns and villages throughout central Bosnia including Vitez, Busovaca, Kiseljak and Ahmici. He was also held responsible for the detention of Bosnian Muslims at eight separate centres, where people were used as human shields, beaten, forced to dig trenches and suffered both physical and psychological abuses.

The Trial Chamber found that General Blaskic had been instrumental in the establishment and operation of the HVO (Croatian Defence Council) and Bosnian Croat police units in Central Bosnia. He also played a pivotal political role in the persecution of Bosniacs (Bosnian Muslims).

According to the Trial Chamber, General Blaskic was fully aware of human rights abuses committed by the armed forces under his command. In 1994 he was the deputy chief-of-staff responsible for investigating war crimes. It also concluded that he never used his authority to bring to account a single soldier in the HVO, Bosnian Croat military police or paramilitary units for crimes such as the murder of over 100 Bosniac civilians in Ahmici village.

With this verdict the tribunal determined for the first time the international character of the Croat-Bosniac conflict in central Bosnia because of the extensive intervention by Croatia, which sent large numbers of its own troops to fight alongside HVO units. On various occasions, Tribunal requests for information from the Croatian Government in relation to its military involvement in the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina were refused or delayed, contributing to the length of the proceedings and hampering the Tribunal's ability to render justice in this case. General Blaskic has the right to appeal his conviction and sentence.

General Tihomir Blaskic is the highest-ranking military commander so far convicted by the Tribunal, after a trial which lasted for over two years. A total of 158 witnesses were heard, including international politicians and military commanders such as General Philippe Morillon, the first French army official to testify before the Tribunal.

“Amnesty International believes that the bringing to justice of those suspected of such crimes is an essential step for the restoration of human rights. It urges UN member states and the governments in the region to continue to pay their debts to the thousands of victims of human rights violations during the armed conflicts in former Yugoslavia by arresting those who have been indicted by the Tribunal,” Amnesty International said.

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