

Ethnic Albanian Describes Kosovo Massacre

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BELGRADE, Serbia-Montenegro (AP) -- Pale and drawn, Saranda Bogojevci spoke just above a whisper Thursday as she described how Serbian paramilitaries shouted and jeered before gunning down her family in a hail of bullets four years ago.

"I just lay on the ground, my eyes shut, pretending to be dead," the ethnic Albanian teenager told a court in a landmark case expected to shed new light on one of the worst massacres of Kosovo's 1998-99 war.

Bogojevci testified along with her three cousins, all of whom survived the March 28, 1999, slaughter of 19 ethnic Albanians in the northern Kosovo town of Podujevo. The children were flown in this week from Manchester, England, where they have lived since the war.

Although the proceedings were closed to media and the public to protect the young witnesses, Bogojevci -- who is 18 -- mustered the courage to testify in open session Thursday in the trial of Sasa Cvjetan, a Serb police officer charged with participating in the massacre.

The case is sensitive for Serbia, still struggling to come to terms with atrocities committed by Serb troops in Kosovo, where they cracked down on independence-minded ethnic Albanians, and elsewhere in the Balkans under the regime of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

Milosevic is now on trial for war crimes and genocide at the U.N. tribunal in The Hague, Netherlands.

Bogojevci, her frail figure clothed in a simple black T-shirt and jeans, spoke calmly but quietly, cradling in her right hand her badly scarred and now paralyzed left arm mutilated by bullet wounds she sustained in the Serb rampage. She was also shot in the leg and back.

Bogojevci described how Serb troops stormed into Podujevo, an ethnic Albanian town where her extended family -- including her mother, aunts, grandparents, many cousins and other relatives -- had sought shelter in a neighbor's house.

The soldiers forced the family into the street, strip-searched them and marched them through the town center and past the police station before taking them through several paths to a garden.

“They told us to hold our hands up in the air and leave our belongings outside the house,” Bogojevci said.

A soldier found marbles in her 6-year-old cousin Genc's pocket and threw them on the ground. The older ethnic Albanian women were ordered to remove their traditional headscarves.

“They were shouting, laughing and cursing us,” Bogojevci said, describing how soldiers shot her uncle, another male relative and an aunt before spraying the rest of the group with automatic gunfire.

“They started shooting at us all. I was somewhere in the middle of the group and I slid against a wall before falling down,” she said. “It felt like the bullets came from all over the place. No one else survived but us children.”

Cvjetan has proclaimed his innocence during the trial, which began last October as one of Serbia's first local war crimes proceedings.

Throughout Thursday's testimony, Cvjetan -- a huge, burly figure in a crew cut and checkered shirt -- sat expressionless in court and never looked at Bogojevci.

After she finished, Cvjetan said he wanted to “express regret” for her suffering.

But he said he objected to the charges against him and the manner in which the children were taken to his prison cell earlier in the week to identify him, contending they easily could have recognized him from newspapers or television accounts.

“What you are doing here is ridiculous,” Cvjetan told the court. “I was not in the garden when all that was going on.”

Bogojevci, asked by the judges if she would pursue compensation from Cvjetan if he is convicted, said simply: “If he did do it, I want him to answer for his crime to my family.”

“As for me personally, I am not asking for anything, nothing can bring my family back,” she said.

Despite the courtroom drama, Lynne Jones, an English psychologist who has worked with the children for the past four years, said their testimony has been “very therapeutic.”

“They feel much better for having been here,” Jones told The Associated Press. “The children have a sense that they want the truth to come out. ... What has really helped them is the knowledge of how important their testimony is.”