



Humanitarian Law Center

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The bombing of the refugee
columns during Operation "Storm"
– August 1995

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In order to establish the facts about the bombing of refugee columns on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Croatian military-police operation "Storm", the Humanitarian Law Center (HLC) is publishing the data and excerpts from the witness statements about those events, which it collected immediately after the refugees' arrival in Serbia.

The formation of refugee columns

On August 4, at 5 o'clock, the Croats shelled Knin. They were pounding so heavily that it was impossible to get out. At one point, we tried to get out and then my older daughter was slightly wounded by a shrapnel in the leg. In the evening, I hitchhiked with two children and two travel bags.

B.L. (1959), from the village of Strmica, Knin Municipality
[Statement taken on 11 September 1995 at the Center for Collective Accommodation of Refugees in Pančevo]

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On Sunday, August 6, my husband Pero and I were harvesting honey. We saw the neighbours running away. We were wondering what it was, why everyone had got up and was running away. However, when you see others fleeing, so do you. We were among the last to leave that day. Our son Gojko came with us. Our neighbour Mrkalj Branko gave us a lift on his tractor. A huge column of tractors, trailers and cars stretched towards Vrginmost.

M.R. (1931), from the village of Donji Sjenicak, Karlovac municipality
[Statement taken on 11 September 1995 at the Center for Collective Accommodation of Refugees in Dolovo, Pančevo Municipality]

The army was first ordered to take reserve positions, and then to withdraw with the civilians.

I was in my army post on Mount Dinara when the shelling of Knin started at 05.00 hrs on August 4. [...] We received the order to get the civilians out first and then for the army to take up reserve positions. The Ustashas were still shelling Knin but not as heavily as before. There was a general panic. Shells landing on stone would make everything crack and break on impact, sending a hail of rocks flying around. It was only around 20.00 hrs that we

were ordered to start withdrawing to Lika together with the civilians. We were to take up our reserve positions in Pađane village. However, when we got there, we were told to continue on to Srb with the civilians. Many people in the column got ill on the way to Srb. A few older people died.

S.V. (1960), driver from Knin
[Statement taken on 14 September 1995 at the Center for Collective Accommodation of Refugees in the village of Varna, Šabac Municipality]

There were about 15 men in my group, then nobody within the next kilometre and so on. At around 23 hours we received orders to withdraw to Medak. From there, we pulled out to Ploče and then through the woods over the Resnik hill. The civilians had pulled out before us. All the villages were deserted.

B.M. (1960), from the village of Gornja Omsica, Gračac Municipality
[Statement taken on 21 September 1995 in the Center for Collective Accommodation of Refugees in the village of Kolari, Smederevo Municipality]

Several refugee columns were formed, moving slowly towards Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. Civilians from Lika and Northern Dalmatia, together with the army, were moving towards the village of Srb, in the direction of the border with BiH.

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We reached Srb at 10.00 hrs on August 5. We were supposed to deploy there, but there was again a change in the plans and we were ordered to continue on to Bosanski Petrovac.

S.V. (1960), driver from Knin
[Statement taken on 14 September 1995 at the Center for Collective Accommodation of Refugees in the village of Varna, Šabac Municipality]

We reached Petrovac on August 7. They got all us men together just outside Petrovac. General Mladić was there and we also saw Martić, sitting in a car. He didn't dare get out. Mladić read out an order over the megaphone, saying all those who failed to sign up at the barracks in Mrkonjić Grad, Banja Luka or Bijeljina by August 18 would be court-martialled.

N.P. (1965), economist from the village of Smilčić, Benkovac Municipality
[Statement taken on 11 September 1995 in the Center for Collective Accommodation in the Firemen's House in Dolovo, Pančevo Municipality]

Some of the refugees from Kordun and Banija, accompanied by the Croatian army, moved via Sisak towards the Zagreb-Belgrade

highway, which they continued on, and crossed into Serbia at the Bajakovo border crossing.

Some of the refugees from Kordun and Banija crossed into BiH through Dvor and Bosanski Novi.

There was no fuel, so many were forced to leave tractors, cars and vans and continue on foot, which increased congestion on the roads.

Stoning of the column at the exit from Sisak and on the highway

The refugee column, which was moving from Glina through Petrinja and Sisak, was attacked by locals on several occasions after exiting Sisak and on the highway.

They were shouting at us and calling us Chetniks and Gypsies. We passed Sisak normally. It was getting dark. It was Wednesday night. There were people, children and adults on the highway. They were standing by the road and on the overpasses. They were throwing stones and sand at us. Luckily they didn't hit us with a bigger stone.

M.M. (1932), from the village of Rastovac Budački, Karlovac Municipality
[Statement taken on 21 September 1995 at the Center for Collective Accommodation of Refugees in Vrbas]

The Croatian soldiers did not attack us, they only insulted us, cursed us, threatened us, shouted „Go to Milošević!“. Accompanied by them and UNPROFOR, we headed to Sisak. When we came to Sisak, the people were around and they were breaking our cars. I saw one young man walking towards my car, but one of them stopped him and said „Don't you see the children inside!“.

R.M. (1964), from Karlovac
[Statement taken on 20 September 1995 at the Center for Collective Accommodation of Refugees in Vrbas]

When we reached Popovača, we got off the highway. [...] They had a car like a jeep with the “police“ sign. They tied my hands with a leather strap and then to the back of the jeep. Then one sat down and started the jeep. I could walk for the first ten meters, but after that, my legs were crawling. My arms and knees were ripped off. The car went pretty fast. I held on to my arms. They drove maybe 20-30 meters. Then I heard a siren, like the

ambulance. It was only when they stopped the Ustashas that I saw that they were two young boys. Later I understood that they were Jordanians. From UNPROFOR. Then this one got out of the car and cut the strap. These guys, the Jordanians, found a trailer and put me there. My tractor remained on the road.

S.D. (1928), a farmer from the village of Točak, Slunj Municipality
[Statement taken on 29 August 1995 in Belgrade]

In Slavonski Brod we were met by a lot of their people by the roadside, ordinary people. There were also on the overpasses. There were adults and children among them. They were shouting at us: „Gypsies, gypsies! Go to Serbia, you can't stay here! Vukovar is ours, this is Croatia!“ They were throwing stones at us as if we were animals. I was terribly humiliated. Our tractor was not hit.

D.R. (1928), from the village of Čremušnica, Vrginmost Municipality
[Statement taken on 12 September 1995 at the Center for Collective Accommodation of Refugees in Deliblatska Peščara, Kovin Municipality]

I stayed on the road by our car alone with that other cop. He treated me very correctly. He asked me why I was running away. I had some home-made brandy with me so we drank it together. He asked me what I was going to do with the car. He threw that piece of concrete out of it. He told me: „Who knows where you will spend the night, take blankets and food from the car“. He said that, it never crossed my mind.

M.K. (1944), from the village of Sjeničak Lasinjski, Karlovac Municipality [Statement taken on 27 October 1995 in Kljajićevo, Sombor Municipality]

When we arrived in Lipovljani, the column stopped again. A Croatian soldier approached us and offered us water. We were terribly thirsty. I got out of the trailer and went with a canister to get water. Another, slightly older soldier approached me and asked: „Where are you going, Grandma?“ I said that I didn't even know where I was going. He filled my canister with water and put food, some cans, 4-5 loaves of bread, in a big paper bag.

M.R. (1931), from the village of Donji Sjenicak, Karlovac Municipality
[Statement taken on 11 September 1995 at the Center for Collective Accommodation of Refugees in Dolovo, Pančevo Municipality]

The bombing of columns on the territory of BiH

The columns of refugees crossed into BiH from two directions; refugees from Lika and Dalmatia near the place of Srb, and a part of refugees from Kordun and Banija near Dvor. When the columns were

already on the territory of BiH, Croatian warplanes struck them twice.

In the raid on August 7 on Petrovačka Cesta road near Bosanski Petrovac, two MIG-21 planes fired several rockets at a column of refugees from Lika and Dalmatia, killing nine civilians, four of them children, and injuring more than 50. According to the HLC data, the following people were killed in the attack: Darinka Drča (1927) and her grandchildren Jovica Drča (1989) and Mirjana Dubajić (1974) from Brotnja near Donji Lapac, sister and brother Nevenka (1984) and Žarko Rajić (1986) from Donji Lapac, Krstan Vuković (1951) and his son Darko (1982) from Donji Lapac, Branko Stjelja (1923) and his son Mirko (1961) from Nadin near Benkovac.

According to the testimonies of the people from that column, there were no military vehicles or organised army in it, only people who had to leave their homes.

6 *Food was being distributed to the people in the column from the semi-trailer, and bread from the helicopter. Suddenly one of our officers shouted to the people waiting for food to run and take cover in the woods; he had noticed a Croatian plane flying over them. Everybody started running in a panic. Some flung themselves down in the canals, others under cars, wherever they could. At that moment, the plane dropped a bomb straight onto the semi-trailer, which immediately burst into flames. The high temperature made the food cans explode.*

S.V. (1960), driver from Knin
[Statement taken on 14 September 1995 at the Center for Collective Accommodation of Refugees in the village of Varna, Šabac municipality]

When we were about seven or eight kilometers from Petrovac, planes came. There were two planes. They dropped bombs, those small cluster bombs. A car in the column got a direct hit. I was 100 meters away from the spot. There were no soldiers or military vehicles in the column. Nor, as far as I could see, was there any kind of weaponry around.

S.L. (1944), from Benkovac
[Statement taken on 11 September 1995 at the Center for Collective Accommodation of Refugees in Dolovo, Pančevo Municipality]

When we were about five kilometers from Bosanski Petrovac, the planes came. They were probably flying low so we heard them but didn't see them. The women in the semi-trailer thought they were ours. But they started firing at us. They fired some kind of incendiary rockets. The three of us were sitting at the back of the trailer, next to the tailboard, because we were the last to get in. From under the tarp, I saw when a "Fićo" car right behind us was hit. Four people burned inside.

Đ.N. (1930), from the village of Strmice, Knin Municipality
[Statement taken on 12.10.1995. in the premises of the HLC in Belgrade]

During that time, Croatian planes were flying over the town. I didn't hear any explosions. I think it was August 9th when we set off to Banja Luka. On the way out of Bosanski Petrovac we came upon the burnt wreck of a semi-trailer and a Mercedes car that was still smoking. The semi-trailer had been carrying food cans which were scattered all around it.

S.P. (1938), from the village of Smilčić, Benkovac Municipality
[Statement taken on 11 September 1995 at the Center for Collective Accommodation of Refugees in Pančevo]

I was expecting Darko and Krstan, and I inquired about them everywhere. On the evening of August 7, we heard that the column was bombed near Petrovac, near the village of Klenovac, around noon, and that many people were killed. We saw Krstan's truck on fire on television in the news. That same evening, we went to Banja Luka to inquire in more detail. The next day, August 8, we received the confirmation that Krstan and Darko had died in the bombing of the column.

J.V. (1960), from the village of Zaklopac, Donji Lapac Municipality,
wife of the deceased Krstan Vuković and mother of the deceased Darko Vuković
[Statement taken on 15 August 2012 in Apatin]

My son, mother, niece and I were in the truck, and my wife and daughter were in the car. We headed in the direction of Bosnia. On August 7, when we were on Petrovačka Cesta road, the bombing started. We were near Klenovac. My mother Dara, my son Jovica and his cousin Mirjana Dubajić were killed in that bombing. I was wounded. A colleague took me to the hospital in Bosanski Petrovac, but they immediately sent me to the hospital in Banja Luka. After three days, I was transferred to the Military Medical Academy in Belgrade.

D.D. (1960), from the village of Brotnja, Donji Lapac Municipality,
father of the deceased Jovica Drča and son of the deceased Darinka Drča
[Statement taken on 15 August 2012 in Apatin]

When the Croatian military operation „Storm“ began, on August 5th, Vedrana, who was pregnant, together with Sava and Aleksandra, set off in a truck trailer for Serbia. Shortly after them, Mirko drove his car with his father Branko and his neighbor Ivanež Dule. When he caught up with them in a column, on August 7th, near Bosanski Petrovac, in Klenovac, a refugee column was shelled. As one grenade fell not far from their car, a shrapnel killed Branko and Mirko on the spot, while Ivaneža Dule was wounded.

N.T, from Danilovgrad in Montenegro, relative of the deceased Branko and Mirko Stjelja
[Statement taken on 8 August 2012. in Barajevo]

The mortal remains of some victims were handed over to their families a few years later.

Mirjana [Dubajić] was buried right next to the road, in the village of Bravsko. The exhumation of her remains was carried out in 2001. The body was handed over to us in Banja Luka, in August of the same year. My sister was buried the next day in the Suvaja cemetery, Gračac municipality, formerly Donji Lapac.

J.A, from Brotnja, Gračac Municipality, sister of the deceased Mirjana Dubajić
[Statement taken on 3 July 2012 in Vrelo, Ub Municipality]

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Mirko and Branko [Stjelja] were found in 2002, next to the road on which they were killed, in the wreckage of a car. Mirko's sister Milka and mother Sava gave their blood for DNA test in Banja Luka. In May 2002, through the "Veritas" organization, Mirko and Branko were taken to Barajevo, where they were buried next to Vedrana.

N.T, from Danilovgrad in Montenegro, relative of the deceased Branko and Mirko Stjelja
[Statement taken on 8 August 2012. in Barajevo]

On Tuesday morning, on August 8, there was a big crowd on the streets of Bosanski Novi. There were moans and cries on all sides. Everyone was looking for their own folks, relatives, friends. The soldiers had rifles in their hands while they were crying. We were all crying, it was hard for everyone. Then I saw my brother Damir. He cried too. We left for Svodna around 8 pm. The column was huge, moving in three lanes. In Svodna, our army left weapons. There was a Serb military checkpoint in Bosnia. We headed towards Prijedor. Soon after we left Svodna, we heard bombing from a plane. They probably targeted the place where the weapons were handed

over. From that noise and fear, many wanted to stop the tractors and trailers by the roadside, so, due to the speed and fear, they fell into a ditch.

N.M. (1976), from the village of Ravno Rašće, Glina Municipality
[Statement taken on 20 September 1995 at the Center for Collective Accommodation of
Refugees in Srbobran]

[...] Just before the evening (August 7th), we arrived in the village of Trgovi. There we learned that there had been a congestion in front of Dvor, because there were clashes there. Between 7 and 8 pm, Serbian tanks began to pass by us, across the meadows towards Dvor. We learned that the Krajina army was withdrawing the personnel and equipment to Bosnia. At around 9 pm, the column started moving again. However, between the villages of Grmušani and Vanjići, members of Arkan's army began to move through the column (they were coming from the direction of Dvor) and they told us that we had to walk towards Dvor. There was confusion among the people, no one wanted to leave their vehicles. Nevertheless, after about half an hour, everyone started moving on foot. We climbed towards Vanjići and then started descending towards Dvor, but then the shelling started again. People began to take refuge in the nearby forest, by the houses along the road. I took shelter with my family in a house and we were the only ones there until after midnight. Around midnight, a lot of people were walking back, towards the vehicles we had left behind. I found my car "peglica" upside down in a ditch and an older man who was there on his tractor told me: "Where have you been, they went around your car and, I guess because it wasn't good enough for them, 4-5 men took it and pushed it in a ditch." He said that it was "some army", but it was only then that I realised that those were Arkan's men and that they had sent us away on foot because of the robbery. All the better vehicles were taken away.

Around 11 o'clock (August 8), the column started moving again and my part of the column started around 12.15. As we approached Dvor, I saw traces of fighting, destroyed houses, at the entrance to Dvor (about 500 m before the sign), on the side of the road, 4-5 soldiers were lying (I do not know which ones). In the city itself, a dead soldier was hanging from a house through the window. On the way from Dvor to Matijevići, I passed the body of a woman. She was strongly built and lying face-down by the side of the road.

I continued for Bosanski Novi. I was there from 1 pm until 9.30 pm. The bombing of Bosanski Novi began at around 5 pm. In fact, the town of Svodna was bombed because the Serbian army stored weapons there.

However, part of the column was also hit. The bombing of Svodna stopped at around 6 pm.

M.Lj. (1957), journalist from Vrginmost
[Statement taken on 15 July 1996 in the premises of the HLC in Belgrade]

According to "Documenta" and "Veritas", on August 8, in the village of Svodna near Bosanski Novi, the Croatian planes bombed a column of refugees from the Kordun and Banija areas, killing three civilians: Marta Galogaža (1935) and Rade Galogaža (1955) and Mile Malobabić (1953) from Slavsko Polje.

The submission by the Republic of Croatia on the bombing of refugee columns

In the proceedings before the International Court of Justice, where Croatia brought a case against Serbia for genocide, Professor Mirjan Damaška, the agent of the Republic of Croatia, submitted a document to the Court on September 10, 2013, stating: "[...] Croatian Armed Forces did indeed take certain actions against Serbian mechanized armored columns on the territory of Bosnia, but in so doing did not target fleeing Serb civilians."

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