

Kosovo victim testifies on torture in Albanian camp

16/03/2011 - 21:19 AFP

A witness told a major war crimes trial Wednesday that he was badly beaten and tortured at a KLA guerrilla camp during the 1999 Kosovo war, often collapsing after a night of ill treatment.

The anonymous witness was testifying at the trial of former commanders of the ethnic Albanian guerrilla Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) accused of war crimes for torturing civilians in prison camps in Albania.

The trial of Sabit Geci and Riza Alija is the first to tackle allegations that KLA rebels set up illegal camps in the neighbouring country during the war.

"I was a subject of ill-treatment at any time," said the man, identified only as "B". He said he "very often collapsed" after the beatings and ill-treatment that usually started in evenings and only ended in mornings.

Geci and Alija are charged with detaining Kosovo Albanians who fled the conflict and were suspected of collaborating with the then Serbian regime or had "political views that differed from the KLA."

Arrested last year, the two are also mentioned in a report by Council of Europe envoy Dick Marty linking Kosovo prime minister Hashim Thaci and other senior KLA commanders to organ trafficking and organised crime.

Both pleaded not guilty before the mixed panel of international and local judges presided over by Briton Jonathan Welford-Carroll.

The international judges are part of the EU's rule-of-law mission to Kosovo known as EULEX. Special police forces armed with rifles guarded the Kosovo's Supreme Court building during the hearings, with the arrest of KLA commanders -- seen as heroes by most of the ethnic Albanian population of Kosovo -- deeply sensitive.

The two suspects were escorted in by a commando police unit who hid their faces with balaclavas while policemen in bulletproof vests were present in the courtroom.

The indictment, presented by Italian prosecutor Mauricio Salustro, said the camps in Albania were "logistics, training and supply" sites, but the accused used them to detain civilians in "filthy and unhealthy conditions".

The prisoners "were beaten regularly and were hit with batons and truncheons, kicked, mistreated and verbally abused," it said.

The war between KLA guerrillas and security forces loyal to Serbian strongman Slobodan

Milosevic ended after June 1999 NATO air campaign ousted Belgrade troops from Kosovo.

The voice of the witness who testified Wednesday via video link from another court room was distorted to secure his anonymity.

He said he was kept in the KLA headquarters in the Albanian town of Kukes from May 15 to June 16, 1999, and identified Geci as being among those who tortured him.

"I have many memories in my head but also on my body. After the first beating by four (KLA) members, Geci drew a (pistol) and hit me in the head," he said.

"Afterwards they sprinkled the wound with salt," he said, adding that he had witnessed heavy beatings of three Kosovo Roma musicians also detained in Kukes.

The prosecution is expected to present 18 witnesses whose identities have been kept secret in a special confidential annex to the indictment.

Geci's attorney Mahmut Halimi insisted the case "is not under jurisdiction of either Kosovo courts or EULEX judges" as the alleged crimes had been committed in Albania.

"We suspect this trial will have political connotation," Halimi warned the court. But judge Welford-Carroll briskly replied the trial was a criminal one. It will continue on Monday. The 3,000-member EULEX mission was launched in December 2008 to enforce the rule of law in Kosovo after it declared independence, as well as to supervise its police, customs and judiciary.

EULEX has the power to take on cases that the local judiciary and police are unable to handle because of their sensitive nature.