

Fed.Forum: Report Mostar, 24 February 1997

Report in Pursuance of the Decisions on Mostar of 12 February 1997

Special Investigation Group Mission Headquarters

*United Nations
International Police Task Force*

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Executive Summary

On 10 February 1997, a procession of several hundred Bosniacs, led by religious and political leaders, marched from Rade Bitange Street in East Mostar toward a cemetery in West Mostar on Kneza Mihajla Humskog Street (Liska Street). This group was celebrating the Bajram religious holiday, during which cemetery visits are a common occurrence. The West Mostar police had been notified of the group's intention to visit the cemetery. Led by the Deputy Mayor of Mostar and accompanied by three (3) UN - IPTF monitors, the group travelled across the Bulevar, the former confrontation line between the communities of East and West Mostar. Upon crossing the Bulevar, the group began to walk up Kneza Mihajla Humskog Street (Liska Street) to the site of the cemetery. At the time of the march, the West Mostar community was celebrating a family Carnival (1) several blocks away at the Rondo.

As the procession entered Kneza Mihajla Humskog Street (Liska Street), they were met by three or four uniformed West Mostar police officers, some of whom advised them not to cause trouble and others who advised them not to proceed further. Following a brief discussion between the march leaders and the West Mostar police on the scene, the group continued to walk toward the cemetery.

The procession proceeded for approximately 100 meters when they were again stopped by West Mostar police officers. A brief discussion took place and the police were observed shaking hands with members of the group. A UN-IPTF monitor on the scene made motions that were interpreted by the group to mean they should continue.

The procession proceeded down the street for another ten (10) meters when a white police van of the West Mostar police came down Kneza Mihajla Humskog Street (Liska Street) toward the marchers, stopping across the roadway in an attempt block the marchers. This was within 100 meters of the cemetery. The marchers walked around this police vehicle and continued walking towards the cemetery. As they moved around the police vehicle, West Mostar police officers were seen using their radio hand sets.

As the procession neared the edge of the cemetery, at least fifteen (15) plainclothes and uniformed West Mostar police officers were seen approaching the group, walking from the direction of the Rondo on Kneza Mihajla Humskog Street (Liska Street). Upon reaching the marchers, these police stopped the group at the edge of the cemetery. Some of the officers were holding batons in their hands. The West Mostar police shouted at the crowd. They drew their batons, and a number of the police officers began to beat members of the group. The group began to retreat back down the street in the direction from which they had come, with the officers following them, hitting stragglers with their batons. At least five (5) of the procession members required medical attention for injuries caused by these beatings.

At this point at least one plainclothes officer had a pistol in his hand, and one West Mostar uniformed police officer fired his weapon in the air as the marchers retreated. At least two plainclothes police officers, with weapons drawn, then fired into retreating marchers, killing one person (Mr. Sulejmanovic Sefika) and wounding at least twenty (20) persons.

During the retreat of the marchers, someone in that group threw a rock. The window of a police van was also broken. The West Mostar police have alleged that three (3) of their officers were injured by the marchers, however there is insufficient evidence to substantiate the claim that two of those officers were injured during this confrontation. They may have been injured in the violence which ensued during the evening following the confrontation. The only substantiated evidence of injury to a West Mostar police officer caused by the marchers was a fractured nose.

Two West Mostar police officers were photographed firing into the retreating crowd: Zeljko Planinic and Ivan Hrkac, who is the Deputy Chief of Police in West Mostar. One plainclothes officer, Bozo Peric, was identified by witnesses and seen firing into the crowd. Because it appears he was standing by the photographer, he does not appear in the photographs. Three other police officers were photographed with their weapons drawn, but were not observed pointing at or firing upon the crowd: Zlatko Pavlovic, Josip Cvitanovic and an as yet unidentified uniformed West Mostar police officer.

As reports of the violence spread, random and sporadic attacks on citizens in locations around the city and on routes out and into Mostar were reported. Many of the attacks were by Bosniacs against Bosnian Croats; but there were some attacks against Bosniacs by Bosnian Croats as well. No arrests were reported to IPTF in any of these situations.

Twenty eight (28) Bosniac families were illegally evicted from their apartments and nineteen (19) others fled West Mostar in fear following the event. In the days after the evictions, those who desired to return to their apartments were reinstated. Six (6) arrests of suspects were made by West Mostar police after intervention by the International Community.

The investigation showed that not only did the West Mostar police receive advance notification of the planned march to the cemetery, but they assigned police officers to the route in advance of the march. There was no contact, visual or physical, between the marchers and the attendees at the West Mostar Carnival. The police stopped the marchers at the edge of the cemetery, which they had a right to visit, and which was more than 200 meters from the Carnival site.

The use by law enforcement officers of excessive force in beating marchers, and of unnecessary and disproportionate lethal force, resulted in one death and numerous injuries. Such actions by law enforcement officials are criminal acts, and constitute violations of internationally recognized standards of law enforcement, of the European Convention on Human Rights, which applies directly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and of the Law on the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

There was a concerted effort from the highest level of the West Mostar police to hide the facts of the confrontation of 10 February 1997. The inaccuracy of information presented by the West Mostar police to the UN-IPTF investigators, including by the Chief of Police Marko Radic, reflects the absence of professional leadership at the highest level in the West Mostar police. Had such professional police leadership been in place, the events of 10 February 1997 would probably not have occurred.

The failure of the police, both East Mostar and West Mostar, to provide protection to potential and actual victims of the series of cross-entity attacks within the city and on the travel routes leading from the city in the days following the confrontation on 10 February, illustrates the serious absence of professional police leadership throughout the area.

(1) Each year the West Mostar community holds a Carnival near the Rondo. It is a family event and is held on a specific date determined by the number of days preceding Easter. It is coincidental that Bajram and the Carnival fell on the same date.

Office of the High Representative