

Written Testimony of Ms. Shyhrete Berisha
submitted before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs
on “Kosovo’s Wartime Victims: The Quest for Justice”
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Shyhrete Berisha is one of three survivors of the massacre of March 26th, 1999 in Suva Reka where over forty women, men, and children of the Berisha family were murdered. She testified before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia three times about how she lost her husband, her four children, and 40 members of her family in an attack by the Serbian police.

My name is Shyhrete Berisha. In the 1990s I lived in Suva Reka with my husband Nexhat, our two daughters Majlinda (born in 1983) and Herolinda (born in 1985), and our two sons Altin (born in 1988) and Redon (born in 1997). Our home was located across the street from the headquarters of the Suva Reka police. We shared our house with my husband’s nephew, Faton Berisha. We lived on the left side of the building, and Faton lived on the right one.

Late in 1998, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) rented our house. Hence, our family moved in with my parents in Mushtisht, which is approximately 9 kilometers away from our home, and Faton moved his family to their uncle’s house.

The OSCE evacuated from the Suva Reka area on March 20th, 1999. The next day, March 21st, 1999 my husband called me on the phone and asked me to move our family back to our house. We cleaned the house and prepared to move back quickly. At the time, we were staying with Faton and his family.

On Wednesday, March 24th, 1999 there was a lot of movement from the Serbian police and their vehicles. Throughout that day and the following evening I saw tanks, buses full of police officers, Pitzgauers, and military vehicles.

At the break of dawn on Thursday, March 25th, 1999 at around 5:00 am we heard a knock at the front door. I got out of bed and opened the door. There were three Serbian policemen standing outside our door and they pointed their automatic weapons at my chest. The taller policeman was poking my chest with his weapon and yelling at me in Serbian “Where are your guests? Where are the Americans? Where is NATO?”. Then one of them asked me where my husband was and told me to call for him immediately. My husband came to the door, and the police took him outside and walked over to our side of the house. I saw that there was a large tank parked only twenty meters away from us, and it was pointing straight at our house.

When they got to our side of the house, the police could not open the doors of the OSCE offices upstairs. Hence, they kicked the doors in. The policemen were screaming and swearing at my husband, and they repeatedly hit him as hard as they could.

The tank was still standing there, and a truck had also come into our yard. The policemen were loading things from our house onto the truck. They stole equipment like televisions, computers, heaters, and everything they could carry.

My sister-in-law Fatime and I walked towards the front door when we noticed that the first three policemen who had come in were now walking back with my husband towards Faton's house. I could see that my husband had been severely beaten and his face was covered in bruises. He stood still as they walked into the house.

The tall policeman told us all to sit down, and he said it in Serbian. "Give us money otherwise we will kill you and burn your house along with your children." he said. Fatime had some money hidden away on her chest and was trying to pull it out when the policeman with the black gloves put his hands down her chest and grabbed all the money. I had 3000 DM on my chest and I gave it all to the policeman with the black gloves because I was truly scared that he would strip me down. Finally, at around 7:00 am, they left.

We were all afraid to stay in our house any longer, so we decided to go to my husband's uncle's house. Vesel Berisha's house was about 30 meters behind our house. We wanted to escape. However, throughout the course of the night, we heard gunshots, and we were too afraid to leave.

My whole family was in that house along with Faton Berisha (27), his mother Fatime (48), his sister Sherine (17), his wife Sebahate (25) and their two sons Ismet (born in 1996) and Eron (born in 1998). Vesel's wife Hava Berisha (60), Vesel's sons Sedat (44), Bujar (40), and Nexhmedin (37) were there too, and so were Bujar's wife Flora (38), Nexhmedin's wife Lirije (24) who was 8 months pregnant, Sedat's wife Vjollca (37), Sedat's daughter Dafina (16), and his sons Drimon (14), and Gnuoz (9). Bujar's sons Blorjan (17) and Edon (14), and his daughter Dorentina (4) were there as well.

Only three people who slept in that house that night survived the events that followed.

At 12:20 pm on Friday, March 26th, 1999 I saw a large number of people leaving from the police station across the street. From what I could tell, there were about 30 of them. Some were in civilian clothes, and others wore police uniforms. They were all carrying automatic weapons. Sedat looked out of the window and said: "They are all from Suva Reka." They ran straight into Ismet Kuci's house.

The next thing I remember was hearing a Serbian man yell out in Albanian "Bujar, where are you?." I recognized the voice. It was a Serbian man named Zoran. Zoran spoke Albanian well, and he used to drive the Albanian bus. Zoran then yelled out in Serbian "Where do you have your Americans? Get out here." Bujar's mother Hava walked out first to speak to Zoran. All the men, women, and children went down to the basement of the house. I heard Zoran scream out in Serbian "Where is Bujar? Get him out here now!". Bujar walked out and addressed Zoran in Albanian saying "What do you want?" We were all still on our way down, I was looking for my children, and everyone was saying "Hurry, hurry!" I heard two gunshots, and Bujar's wife Flora cried out, "They just shot my Bujar!"

The terrible feeling that we felt is indescribable. Everyone was running for the back door. We were all confused, and barefoot as there was no time to put shoes on. We were running out of the back door and towards our house when I saw that we had been surrounded. There were so many men,

police and civilians everywhere. I recognized the man who stopped my husband. His name was Miscovic and he was the owner of the "Boss Hotel". One of the policemen grabbed Faton by the hand, and his mother Fatima tried to stand between the policeman and her son. The same thing happened when they grabbed Nexhmedin. His wife Lirije, who was 8 months pregnant, tried to step in between them.

I remember seeing an empty yellow truck parked on the front lawn of our house, and the body of a large man lying face down next to it. I heard Misovic say to Nexhat "Raise your hands in the air." When he did so, Misovic shot him in the back, three times. I remember Nexhmedin and his wife Lirije running when they saw what happened to my husband Nexhat. Nexhmedin was pulling his wife by the hand and one of the men in civilian clothing was yelling out in Serbian "Shoot! What are you waiting for?"

At that moment the shooting began, and it would not stop. We started running in all directions. Majlinda along with my two sons went one way, and I went another way. We stopped at a place which used to be an Albanian coffee shop and found three other Berisha families. All the women and children from our house were there, and Majlinda with my two sons arrived from another direction very shortly. I noticed that Altin was bleeding and I asked him what happened. He told me that they shot him on the hand and on the leg, but asked me not to worry. The Serbians had been shooting at my children while they were running away. Altin's heart was beating extremely fast, and his face was completely pale.

The police came to the cafe and screamed at us in Serbian telling us to go inside. We had just gone inside and were sitting down when they walked in and started shooting at us. I was shot on the right shoulder and fell to the ground. When they finished shooting us the police officers walked back outside. I could hear them speaking, but I could not make out exactly what they were saying. Some of the people were still alive, not even wounded. I don't know how they survived. There were about 40 to 50 people there, mostly women and children. There were only four men.

My children Majlinda and Redon were not wounded. Redon kept telling Majlinda, "I want to go to mom." I took Redon from Majlinda and I took a bottle of milk which I had stashed in my trousers and gave it to Redon.

The soldiers must have heard us speaking because they came to the door and threw a hand grenade into the room. I turned around to look at my children. I saw my son Redon sitting there covered in blood, still holding his bottle of milk. I saw Majlinda and half of her head was missing. I saw Sebahat with most of her head blown off. I slowly reached for my youngest son Redon and touched him with my feet, but he was dead. The soldiers did not come in. Sebahate's two children, Ismet and Eron, were still alive. They were crying. Ismet, the three-year-old, was crying, calling out everyone's name and asking for water. He kept saying "Mom my leg is hurting."

I heard the Serbian soldiers talking, and one of them said something about placing our bodies on a truck. Vjollca and Altin's heads were close to mine so I managed to tell them that they should act dead. Then the Serbians came in again. They were shooting at us with something. They hit Eron and then they hit me on the right thigh. The shot went through my leg and hit Eron too. Eron did not move anymore. I think he died right then and there. Later I realized that I had been hit in the stomach as well, but had not felt it at the time.

The soldiers came into the room and started to load the bodies onto a truck. I remember that I could still hear people moaning. While they dragged my body by the leg and arm I kept my eyes closed and my mouth slightly open so that I could breathe. I remember that as they were dragging me one of the men said in Serbian "Fuck life. What kind of life is this? I can't handle this anymore." The other man who was dragging me replied "Hurry, hurry. We have got to clean this place up."

They placed me on a stretcher and wanted to take two gold chains from around my neck. After they found the latch and were able to unlock the necklaces, they threw my body onto the back of the truck. I landed on top of a pile of bodies and my daughter Majlinda's body was thrown on top of me. Once they were done, the soldiers pulled the curtain of the truck shut, and the truck started to move.

I could hardly breathe from the smell of blood and dead bodies. When I looked around, I saw the body of my son Altin and called out to see if he was still alive, but then I saw that his head was split in half. His eyes and mouth were still open.

Vjollca must have heard me speak. She raised her head and said, "Shyhret are you still alive?" I replied that I was. I asked if Gramoz was still alive and she answered "Yes." I suggested that we jump from the truck. Vjollca said, "No we shouldn't jump because the truck is going too fast, but we should dig our way out from the dirt once they bury us and escape." I said "If they bury us, all of these bodies will be over us and then they will place dirt on top of them. There is no way that we will be able to get out."

I told Vjollca that we should jump from the back of the truck and not from the sides because they would be able to see us in the mirrors. There was a tear in the truck's curtain on the back, so I checked to see if there was anyone following us. I was injured so severely that I did not think twice, I just jumped. I injured my forehead during the fall. Later I realized that I had jumped out in the village Malsia e Re and I was on the main road from Suva Reka to Prizren.

An old man whom I met later in Kukas told me that he had seen me fall from the truck and that he told two young men to run over and take me into a car. They drove me to a house nearby and placed me in the front yard. The two young men drove me to a village called Grejkoc where I received medical treatment. Later two cars with KLA soldiers arrived and transferred me to the village Budakova. The doctor who treated me there recognized me because we used to catch the same bus. He treated my wounds, all twelve of them that were on my body.

People told me that Vjollca and Gramoz did survive and are still in Kosovo. When the soldiers picked me up in Grejkoc, I asked them if they would follow the truck that I had rolled off of and find out where they buried the bodies of my family. Five days later a soldier came and told me that there were two mass graves in the area of Ljubizhda and that the soldiers had marked the graves.

I call on the United States Congress to address the impunity for war crimes and human rights abuses committed in Kosovo by taking action to demand justice for the victims.