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U.S. judge in Atlanta awards \$140 million to men who claimed torture in Bosnia

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A federal judge in Atlanta awarded \$140 million in damages Monday to four men found to have been tortured and abused by a Bosnian Serb soldier as part of an "ethnic cleansing" campaign in the early 1990s.

Nikola Vuckovic, once a soldier in the Bosnian Serb army, was living in Stone Mountain at the time the four Bosnian Muslims filed a federal lawsuit against him in 1998.

Vuckovic, 42, denied the allegations in an interview with The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, but he left the United States and did not attend the trial of the lawsuit last October.

Vuckovic's alleged torture and abuse occurred in the Bosnian town of Bosanski Samac, where the four plaintiffs were held prisoner by Serb forces. According to the allegations, one plaintiff, Kemal Mehinovic, was kicked in the head by Vuckovic and ordered to lick his blood off the wall.

As Vuckovic carried out the beatings, he shouted genocidal, ethnic slurs against Muslims, Mehinovic said. Vuckovic also played Russian roulette with a revolver with prisoners and beat them senseless with wooden bats, chair legs and metal pipes, Mehinovic said. Vuckovic was sued after being recognized in the Atlanta area.

Plaintiffs Mehinovic and Hasan Subasic both live in Salt Lake City and plaintiffs Muhamed Bicic and Safet Hadzialijagic live in Europe. Each plaintiff was awarded \$10 million in compensatory damages and \$25 million in punitive damages, although their ability to collect any of the judgment appears remote.

"I'm happy, but I'm sorry he was not there," Subasic, now a welder, said in a telephone interview of Vuckovic's disappearance from the trial. Subasic said he does not want any other human rights abusers who come to the United States to feel safe living here.

"I brought this case because I felt an obligation toward those who were killed or tortured by Vuckovic," Mehinovic said. "I am satisfied with the result."

Vuckovic was sued under the Alien Tort Claims Act of 1789 and the Torture Victim Protection Act of 1991, which allow victims of torture and human rights abuses to sue their captors who live in or visit the United States.

Joshua Sondheimer, litigation director for the San Francisco-based Center for Justice and

Accountability, which represented the plaintiffs, said the judgment will disrupt Vuckovic's ability to ever live comfortably in the United States. This victory alone affords Vuckovic's victims "a measure of justice," Sondheimer said. But Decatur lawyer Larry Pankey, who represented Vuckovic before he left the United States, called the litigation "a waste of the court's time. We put all this time and effort in to put up this gaudy \$140 million number. But what have they accomplished? The guy was holding down an \$8-an-hour job."

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