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Serbia: Pursue Mladic not human rights activists

Amnesty International today called upon the Serbian authorities to stop the imprisonment of a human rights activist Maja Stojanovic, convicted by a Serbian court for displaying posters in an unauthorized place. The posters had urged the Serbian authorities to arrest and transfer alleged war criminal Ratko Mladic to the International Criminal Court in the Hague. Maja Stojanovic is due to be imprisoned tomorrow.

"Maja Stojanovic has been convicted after a trial which has cast serious doubts about the independence of the judiciary in Serbia. If imprisoned Amnesty International would consider her to be a prisoner of conscience," said Sian Jones, researcher on the Balkans for Amnesty International.

"Instead of allowing Maja Stojanovic to be imprisoned the Serbian authorities need to uphold the commitment they took while joining the Council of Europe to arrest Ratko Mladic and to inform the people of Serbia about the crimes committed by the regime of Slobodan Milosevic, not only against the other peoples of the region but also against the Serbs."

Amnesty International is concerned about reports that the judge at the trial stated that victims of the Srebrenica massacre had "deserved what happened to them" and that "the same Muslims" had burned down the judges house in Kosovo. Amnesty International is also concerned that although the court argued that some of the posters displayed by Maja Stojanovic had been posted illegally, no other institutions or private companies putting posters in the same place are known to have been prosecuted.

"It is clear that Maja Stojanovic has been singled out for punishment because of her belief that alleged war criminals responsible for the massacre of thousands in Srebrenica must be brought to justice," added Sian Jones.

"The case of Maja Stojanovic is yet another example of the attempts by the Serbian authorities to penalize the work of human rights organizations seeking to deal with Serbia's past."

Background

Maja Stojanovic, a member of the non-governmental organization "Youth Initiative for Human Rights" (YIHR), was convicted of "posting placards in an illegal place" by the Court of Minor Offences in Niš on 7 November 2005, and ordered to pay the maximum fine allowed by law. A subsequent appeal failed in December 2005. Maja Stojanovic has not paid the fine imposed on her as she is unable to afford it and because she believes she was acting in the public interest by drawing attention to Serbia's international obligations regarding violations of international humanitarian law during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Maja Stojanovic is now facing imprisonment for non-payment of the fine.

In 2005 Amnesty International reported on a campaign of harassment and intimidation against human rights defenders and NGOs in Serbia, including YIHR, in the form of graffiti on their premises; verbal and written threats; apparent "burglaries" and threats of legal action or the opening of what appear to be malicious prosecutions. There have also been a number of physical attacks on human rights defenders and lawyers. The authorities have failed to investigate and bring to justice non-state actors suspected of physical attacks on NGOs in the "Facing the Past" coalition, and Amnesty International also notes that no one has been brought to justice, for example, following an attack by members of a right-wing group on YIHR members during a commemoration on 11 July 2006 of the 11th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre.

11 July is recognised as the anniversary of the massacre at Srebrenica in Bosnia and Herzegovina, during which almost 8,000 men and boys were killed by the Bosnian Serb Army under the command of General Ratko Mladic in and around Srebrenica.

Amnesty International notes that Serbia currently holds the chair of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe which brings with it special responsibilities. The country occupying the Chair of the Council of Europe should exhibit exemplary cooperation with the bodies of the Council of Europe and show leadership in respecting its obligations as a member state, including in the field of human rights. If this is not the case, the credibility of the Council of Europe risks being seriously undermined.

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