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Bosnia-Herzegovina: Some dignity at last for victims of “disappearance” in Prijedor

Amnesty International today expressed the hope that the discovery of the bodies of Father Tomislav Matanovic and his parents - who “disappeared” in Prijedor in 1995 - and their burial in a religious ceremony tomorrow will return some dignity to the victims and their family.

“After over six years of agony of not knowing what happened to the Matanovic family, the funeral will help provide some kind of closure, and enable family, friends and parishioners to mourn their deaths”, the organization said.

In early September 2001 the bodies of three persons were discovered in a well some 15 kms outside Prijedor. Preliminary forensic examination indicates that these are the bodies of Father Matanovic and his family, and that they were shot in the head before being dropped in the well.

Amnesty International now urges the authorities of Republika Srpska (RS), to fulfil their duty to fully investigate the “disappearances” and subsequent extrajudicial executions, and bring to justice those thought to be responsible.

Amnesty International welcomes the fact that since November 2000 a team of Banja Luka police detectives and an investigative judge have been conducting an investigation which appears to be more thorough than the perfunctory measures taken by the RS authorities in the past. The organization urges the authorities to ensure that this investigation will be completed as a matter of urgency and with a view

to instigating criminal proceedings against those suspected of involvement in the “disappearance”.

Background

Father Tomislav Matanovic, a Croatian Roman Catholic priest, and his parents were last seen when they were taken to the police station in Prijedor in September 1995. On 24 August 1995, Bosnian Serb police took Father Tomislav Matanovic to the police station in Prijedor, allegedly for security reasons. He was returned to his parents' home the next day, and confined there under police guard until 19 September when the priest and his parents were taken from their home to the Urije police station in Prijedor. Since then the Republika Srpska authorities have neither openly acknowledged that Father Tomislav Matanovic or his parents were in detention nor given any reasons for their arrest.

Amnesty International members have been campaigning since 1996 for the Bosnian Serb authorities to either disclose the place where the Matanovics were being held, and order their immediate and unconditional release, or to reveal what happened to them after September 1995.

In July 1997 the Human Rights Chamber of Bosnia-Herzegovina ordered the RS authorities to immediately ascertain the fate and whereabouts of the family; however, no measures were taken by the RS government to implement the decision for three years, until an investigative team reopened the case in November 2000, after heavy pressure from the United Nations Mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina (UNMIBH).

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