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Serbia: Amnesty International condemns “retaliatory” arrest of Kosovo Albanian trade unionist

Amnesty International deeply concerned by the apparently politically motivated arrest by the Serbian authorities on 28 March of Hasan Abazi, a 65-year-old Kosovo Albanian trade unionist, who was on his way to an international conference in Croatia.

Hasan Abazi was arrested in Končulj in Bujanovac municipality in southern Serbia, apparently on an arrest warrant issued in 1995 for "crimes against [the] constitution and security of Republic of Serbia".

Amnesty International is extremely disturbed that, according to the Serbian Minister of Interior Ivica Dačić, the arrest was carried out “in retaliation” for the arrest on 28 March by the Kosovo authorities of four Kosovo Serb municipal officials who were carrying election material for the 6 May Serbian parliamentary election into Kosovo.

According to media reports, the Minister stated, “Serbian police did not wish to take this approach, but the situation obviously could no longer go on without retaliation. If someone wants to compete in arrests, we have the answer”.

“On the basis of these statements, Amnesty International stresses that people’s individual liberty cannot be put at risk as a bargaining chip in a political dispute between Serbia and Kosovo,” said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International Europe and Central Asia Programme Director.

According to his son, Haki Abazi, his father has not been allowed to see his lawyer.

Amnesty International reminds the Serbian authorities that under Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), to which they are a state party, anyone arrested for a criminal offence has the right of access to a lawyer of his own choosing.

When Haki Abazi visited Vranje prison, where his father is being detained after being transferred from Bujanovac police station, he was not provided with any information about his father’s detention, or what would happen to him. Haki Abazi was only told that he could bring food to his father today and provide him with clean clothes on Saturday.

According to the President of the High Court in Vranje, the case remains with the police. He reportedly stated that the 1995 documentation, on which Hasan Abazi’s arrest was apparently based, is no longer valid.

The arrest comes after Serbia and Kosovo signed an outline agreement on freedom of movement, including for Kosovo Albanians travelling into Serbia, which entered into force in December 2011, and was one of the EU’s preconditions for granting Serbia candidacy status.

Background

Hasan Abazi is currently president of the Independent Trade Union of Metalworkers of Kosovo, and was a member of the government of President Ibrahim Rugova, during the period of Serbian military rule during the 1990s.

Six men, alleged to be police officers of the Serbian Ministry of Interior, were also arrested on 25 February 2012 in Gjilan/Gnjilane in Kosovo. They have not yet been charged with a criminal offence. Their pre-trial detention was extended on 27 March 2012 for a further 60 days.