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Federal Republic of Yugoslavia: Killings in the Ka_anik area

Amnesty International researchers in the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia have unearthed information about a series of offensives by Serbian police and the Yugoslav army in the Ka_anik area of southern Kosovo which led to the killing of at least four men and the "disappearance" of at least 22 men.

Refugees from the area interviewed by the Amnesty International researchers have given consistent accounts of the offensives, which started in early March 1999 and appeared to target each village in the region in turn. Although the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) had a presence in the villages there had apparently not been any serious fighting in the area prior to this.

The information gathered by the Amnesty International delegates appears to indicate that there was an organized plan by which Yugoslav forces began by attacking outlying villages in the Ka_anik area, and gradually moved closer to the town.

Amnesty International is urgently investigating further reports from Ka_anik and neighbouring villages, and is seeking to confirm further details of these incidents.

Kotlina village is 12 kilometres southwest of the town of Ka_anik. The first attack on the village occurred on 9 March, and the second early on the morning of 24 March -- when the village was shelled by government forces, beginning at about 8.30 in the morning.

The village was difficult to escape from as it lies in a valley. Women, children and several men remained in the village but the majority of the younger men fled into the woods to hide.

According to reports, police entered the village around midday and shot three men: Zymer Loku, Vesel Vllashi and Idriz Kuçi. The remaining men were taken to the police station of Uroševac (Ferizaj), where at least one was severely beaten.

A witness who later returned to the village told the Amnesty International researchers that the bodies of Vesel and Idriz were found burned in a house which had been set on fire. Zymer remained alive after receiving at least two bullet wounds, but he died that evening in the absence of adequate medical care.

Twenty-two of the men who hid in the woods during the offensive remain unaccounted for. Amnesty International is seriously concerned about their fate, and is seeking further information about them. There have been a number of reports, so far unconfirmed, that a number of other bodies have been found in the area.

Amnesty International has also received several reports of incidents in the town of Ka_nik. One of the killed there was Blerim Dema, an ethnic Albanian whose father had previously rented out one of his properties as the office of the Verification Mission of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). He was killed on 28 March, after several masked police officers came to the Dema's family home at about 10.30 that morning.

Blerim was with three other men. They attempted to escape via the yard. The three other men managed to jump a wall and hide in a neighbouring house but Blerim apparently failed to climb the wall and was caught in the yard by the police officers. Shots were heard by witnesses in the adjoining house and Blerim's dead body was found later that day. Witnesses later stated that he had bullet wounds to the head and chest.

Other witnesses also report seeing at least five other bodies in the central area of the town. Confirmation of the identity and manner of death of all the bodies is not yet available. Among the information that Amnesty International is seeking to confirm is the shooting by police of three ethnic Albanians in front of an apartment block in Kralj Petar Street (formerly Marshal Tito Street) in the centre of the town on or around 27 March.

Most of the population of the town fled in the days immediately following these killings and trekked over the mountains into Macedonia. Some of the population appears to have been taken to the border by buses organised by the local authorities.

For further information or to arrange an interview, please phone Amnesty International's press office on +44 171 413 5566 or 5562

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