

FRY: Under the volcano -- increased violence against opposition groups

Three days before the elections in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia Amnesty International called for the government to stop using intimidation and violence against the opposing groups.

The weeks preceding the forthcoming elections in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, have seen a deeply disturbing rise in the use of violence, intimidation and harassment, Amnesty International said. "The opposition groups must be allowed to exercise their right to freedom of expression".

The instances cited by Amnesty International include:

On 2 September in the central Serbian town of Lajkovac, Mile Milic, a local election candidate for the opposition party Nova Srbija (New Serbia), was detained by police officers while putting up posters in support of the opposition. He was reportedly ill-treated by police while in custody, suffering injuries to his head and ear.

On 8 September a group of six members of the opposition student group Otpor were severely ill-treated by police officers. They were questioned on their activities and aims at the police station in the southern Serbian town of Vladicin Han. On the conclusion of the questioning, they were permitted to leave, but were then met by the Commandant of police and other officers who were reportedly under the influence of drink. The six were forced back to the police station and were beaten on the body, limbs, genitals, and soles of the feet. They were also threatened by the police, who said that they would be able to kill them with impunity by taking them to the border with

Kosovo, where their deaths could be ascribed to border guards. After their release they required medical attention.

On 15 September two members of *Otpor*, who had been spraying anti-government graffiti in the Belgrade suburb of Rakovica, were arrested by police officers, who reportedly beat them at the time of arrest and while taking them to the police station. The following day they were tried in a misdemeanours court and sentenced to 10 days imprisonment for "offences against public peace and order". Their lawyers claimed that they were not granted access to their clients before the hearing, and that they had not been permitted to be present while the arresting officer gave evidence.

Such attacks on those opposed to the government, who are exercising their rights to freedom of expression must cease," Amnesty International said.

All such incidents should be investigated, and those responsible be brought to justice".

Background

The presidential elections, which follow a change in the FRY constitution permitting Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic to stand again (under the previous constitution he was obliged to step down after serving two terms), are due to be held on 24 September. Current opinion polls show that his main challenger in the presidential race, Vojislav Kostunica, the candidate of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS), a coalition of opposition parties, has a strong lead, and that the DOS is can be expected to make a strong showing in both federal and local elections which are to be held on the same day.

However, the elections are widely expected to be subject to manipulation by the government, and it is feared that the ruling coalition will refuse to recognize the results if they should go against it.

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