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KOSOVO: A DECADE OF UNHEEDED WARNINGS

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The tragedy of Kosovo is a tragedy for the idea of human rights itself. The pattern of gross human rights violations which the world is witnessing in Kosovo reminds us that the whole concept of inviolable, universal human rights, as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights over fifty years ago, remains a very fragile presence in our world. Any complacency we may feel about what the international human rights protection system has achieved over the past five decades should be dispelled by the scale of the forcible expulsions, extrajudicial executions and "disappearances" that we are witnessing in the twilight of the century. Those seemingly endless columns of humanity streaming out of Kosovo - following in the footsteps of the scores of other forced migrations which have so characterized our age - remind us of how much work remains to be done.

Regretfully, the human tragedy in Kosovo has come as no surprise to Amnesty International. For more than a decade, the organization has been documenting and publicizing its concerns about the systematic violation of human rights in the province. Throughout this period, few of the victims of human rights violations in Kosovo, whose names and cases appeared in Amnesty International reports, have received any form of redress for the crimes committed against them by the Yugoslav police and security forces.

In providing the international community with a carefully-researched record of human rights violations against Kosovo's ethnic Albanian population since the 1980s, Amnesty International has consistently warned of a human rights disaster waiting to happen. For the most part the international community did not want to know and did not want to act. Its failure to prevent the outbreak of armed conflict in Kosovo has provided the context for further violations of human rights.

Amnesty International takes no position on the political issues concerning the status of Kosovo within the FRY or on the military intervention of NATO which began in March. It is clear however that NATO's intervention is primarily a response to the security situation in the region. So far the intervention has failed to prevent or stop the human suffering.

Amnesty International believes that the conflict in Kosovo is one that is rooted in long-term, systematic human rights violations of the ethnic Albanian population by the Serbian authorities. Therefore concern for human rights protection and promotion must underpin all efforts towards a settlement of the critical situation in Kosovo. The international community should insist that any

agreement between the various parties contains strong provisions that reflect a serious, consistent and long-term commitment to protect and promote human rights effectively in Kosovo, and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) as a whole.

It can be argued that the chronic neglect of our warnings over the past decade and the almost complete absence of redress for the people of Kosovo has been one of the chief catalysts for the current conflict. If a lasting peace in Kosovo is to be secured, this long chain of impunity must at last be broken. Only by ensuring that those responsible for human rights violations and breaches of international humanitarian law are held accountable for their actions in Kosovo - in the present situation and during the preceding decade - can we hope to see future conflicts averted and a genuine culture of human rights take root in the region.

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