

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia: Amnesty International is wearing black for Kosovo

Closing borders to Kosovo refugees and displaced persons will do nothing but extend the human misery of the conflict, Amnesty International said today as it announced its International Day of Action for Kosovo on Saturday, 19 September.

The organization's members and supporters all over the world will be *wearing black for Kosovo*, uniting in a demonstration of dismay and outrage at the continuing human rights tragedy in Kosovo province. The program of the events includes vigils, demonstrations, public meetings and other activities.

Amnesty International's Day of Action is also a display of solidarity for the Serbian *Women in Black* organization. *Women in Black*, which has been in the forefront of the peace movement in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, will be holding its own public protest outside the Serbian parliament in Belgrade this evening.

"The sluggish response of the international community in the past few months has contributed to Kosovo's tragedy," Amnesty International said. "The perpetrators of gross human rights abuse in the province have thrived through a summer of continuing impunity. With no prospect of a political solution in sight, and almost 300,000 displaced persons and refugees on the move or crowded into inadequate shelters, what will winter bring?"

"Those who would abuse human rights in Kosovo need to be made to see that their crimes will be investigated and that they will be caught, prosecuted and punished. That message, delivered urgently and emphatically by the international community, might yet forestall a greater tragedy."

The situation for the victims of Kosovo worsened earlier this week, when the Montenegrin authorities sealed the border with Kosovo province in an attempt to block access for those seeking shelter from the conflict. They also expelled a group of 3,500 to 4,000 Kosovo Albanians to Albania, forcing them to become refugees.

In Kosovo province itself, thousands of internally displaced ethnic Albanians are sleeping in the open as the winter approaches. As many as 7,000 are believed to be in the Pe_ area, close to the border with Montenegro with little or no access to international humanitarian organizations. At least 200,000 people -- most ethnic Albanians, but also some Serbs -- are displaced within Kosovo.

Amnesty International is repeating its earlier appeals to the Yugoslav and Serbian authorities and to the Kosovo Liberation Army to halt human rights abuses and give free access to humanitarian organizations and to the international community to ensure adequate monitoring of abuses in Kosovo.

Elsewhere in Europe some Kosovo refugees are receiving appalling treatment. Only a few days ago Amnesty International interviewed an ethnic Albanian family from Kosovo. After four months of sheltering in hills near their home, then in Montenegro and Albania, the family had flown out of Albania in an attempt to reach relatives in western Europe. Instead of meeting their waiting relatives in a third country, the family had been effectively detained in Budapest airport, Hungary, for over a week, without proper food, washing facilities or adequate

clothing. Moreover, the family had been given no information about how they might seek protection as refugees or even been provided with access to their luggage in order to retrieve their relatives' telephone numbers.

The Montenegrin authorities have received an influx of at least 40,000 people displaced by the conflict in Kosovo, most of them ethnic Albanian civilians; on top of some 30,000 refugees from the earlier Bosnian and Croatian conflicts. Amnesty International recognizes the burden this places on a small republic, but calls on the Montenegrin authorities and the international community as a whole to redouble their efforts to protect displaced persons and refugees and meet their legal and moral obligations.

In an attempt to justify their actions, the Montenegrin authorities have also cited the presence of some armed men -- fighters of the Kosovo Liberation Army -- among the ethnic Albanians crossing into Montenegro. While such people may not enjoy the same rights to protection as civilians, their presence cannot be used to deny the protection of others fleeing human rights violations, AI argued.

"The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia must abide by the United Nations (UN) Guiding Principles on the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons which were adopted earlier this year," Amnesty International said. "Other countries must also ensure that asylum-seekers from Kosovo are given protection."

/ENDS

Amnesty International has published in the last couple of months a series of reports providing detailed scrutiny of the long-standing patterns of abuses in Kosovo province. For copies of these reports or to speak to our country expert on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, please telephone Amnesty International Press Office on +44 171 413 5562 or +44 171 413 5566.

Amnesty International now has an ISDN line for studio-quality radio interviews from their offices in London. Please telephone for further details.