

FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF YUGOSLAVIA (KOSOVO):

Killings in the Izbica area

Amnesty International delegates, in cooperation with members of the Albanian Human Rights Group, have interviewed dozens of refugees from the Drenica region of Kosovo province. The testimony of these witnesses, who had fled or been forcibly expelled from villages near Izbica and Kladernica (Kllodernicë in Albanian), in Srbica (Skënderaj) municipality, or had been hiding from Serbian security forces in the surrounding hills, has intensified initial fears that scores of civilians were killed in villages around the area. There are several witnesses to the killings, who either survived when others were executed or saw people killed. Many other ethnic Albanians also saw evidence of executions when they helped locate, identify and bury the bodies of victims.

The large number of reported incidents, coupled with numerous rumours about the killings, make it difficult to gain a complete picture of events which took place from 25 to 28 March 1999, as Serbian and Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) forces established control over the region. However, individuals who were expelled or fled the region by different routes have confirmed details which increase Amnesty International's fears that of well over one hundred civilians or combatants detained in the Drenica region during this period, many were killed and were buried individually at a grave site in Izbica. Amnesty International believes that many other victims were buried in smaller grave sites in numerous villages in the area.

By the middle of March 1999 the area, which lies west of the town of Srbica, held not only its normal population of thousands of villagers, but also a large number of ethnic Albanians displaced from other villages in Kosovo. The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which had a strong presence in the area, had largely established control over much of the region away from the main roads. Despite ongoing Serbian and FRY military activity, KLA units succeeded in retaining an active presence in the area.

Refugees and former KLA soldiers interviewed by Amnesty International delegates reported that a Serbian offensive against the region, already scarred by fighting that took place in 1998, began on 25 March 1999. Serbian and FRY forces took control of Banja (a predominantly Serb village in the area) and moved towards Kladernica, which they surrounded and captured on 27 March. On 28 April Serb forces surrounded and took control of Izbica village, which is located on the other side of a range of hills a few kilometres to the east of Kladernica.

When it became clear that they were unable to withstand the Serbian onslaught KLA members abandoned the villages and withdrew into the surrounding hills. Some of the civilians remained in their homes or gathered together in village schools, including those of Kladernica, Tušilje (Tushilë) and Turi_evac (Turiçevc), while others fled towards neighbouring villages, many of them taking refuge in Tušilje, which was still under KLA control. Others fled into the hills and attempted to hide there.

Kladernica

One such group included several members of the Osmani family from Kladernica, who had fled into the mountains behind their village. At approximately 1.30pm on 27 March, Serbian forces in camouflage uniforms wearing black bandannas arrived. The family was ordered to form a line and clasp their hands behind their heads. Family members told Amnesty International delegates that four men were separated from the rest of the group. One of these was Nazmi Osmani, a music teacher at the local primary school, whose wife Zylfije Osmani was pregnant. The couple had a two-year-old son. A female member of his family begged for mercy for him and handed over 400 Deutschmarks to secure his release. However, another Serb soldier who reviewed the group again ordered that Nazmi Osmani be separated from the group once more. Nazmi Osmani, Rexhep Osmani, Xhevdet Osmani, and Ahmet Osmani were then shot dead in front of their family members, including small children.

Later the same day another group of displaced people hiding in Vragodol, a mountainous area above the town, were surrounded by Serbian forces. A group of men were separated from the women and marched away in the direction of the road leading from Izbica to Vo_njak (Vojnik), and were apparently executed. Members of the Osmani family who spoke to Amnesty International delegates said that the incident occurred close to the area where they witnessed their own family members being killed, and that there were 24 victims. Although they did not witness any killings directly, they reported hearing shots after the men were marched away. A witness interviewed separately by Amnesty International delegates reported seeing a number of bodies lying on that road (see below, page 6).

On the same day all the people who were in Kladernica village were ordered to leave, and fled into the mountains. A woman of approximately 60 years of age, Eminë Latifi, was killed while walking towards the mountains; a witness who spoke to Amnesty International described seeing her being shot near a bridge across a stream. A few minutes later, in a separate incident, the same witness saw Serb forces shoot a 27-year-old woman named Miradije. According to the witness, the Serb forces had targeted her 13-year-old brother, and Miradije was shot when she tried to protect him. Another man reported that he had found a woman named Miradije Mulaj, who had been shot in the leg, lying unconscious near a stream. According to this man, she was taken to a relative's house, where she received medical care, but as her name appeared on a list of victims of killings from Kladernica issued on 6 April by Kosovapress, a news agency with close links to the KLA, it appears she may have died as a result of her injuries.

In addition, some civilians may also have been killed as a result of the shelling of houses in the area. For example, four members of the Bekaj family, including two children, reportedly died in their house after a shell hit it.

Witnesses reported to Amnesty International that some individuals survived the Kladernica executions. These remained in Kosovo either in hiding, as part of the KLA, or because they were wounded and being cared for. Amnesty International knows the names of these individuals but, for their safety, is not making them public.

Izbica

The following day, 28 March, which was the date of the Muslim festival of *Bajram*, Serb forces came to Izbica. Most men of military age woke before dawn to flee into the mountains. A group of women, children and elderly men abandoned the town and gathered in a field, carrying a white sheet to indicate that they had surrendered. According to one of them, Emona Behramaj, soldiers wearing camouflage uniforms and bandannas approached the group. Men were separated from the women, including relatives of Emona Behramaj's husband: Nuhe Behramaj, Demush Behramaj, Muhamet Behramaj, Ethem Tahi, Muharrem Tahi and Azem Tahi, all of whom Emona described as elderly men. Another woman interviewed by Amnesty International, who made her way to Albania independently and had had no contact with other refugees from Izbica, confirmed the account of how they had gathered in the field and how men were separated from the women, children and elderly and taken away. This woman reported that she recognized three of these men: Dibron Duraku, Fazli Bajra and Bajram Bajra. They were taken towards the village of Leo_ina (Leqinë). A short time later she heard shots coming from that direction.

There are several people who claim to have survived execution at Izbica. One of them who was interviewed by a representative of the Albanian Human Rights Group, described being in a group of what he estimated to be approximately 150 men who had been separated from women in Izbica after members of Serbian and FRY security forces had entered the village. He reported that this group contained male children of 14 or 15 years of age. The villagers were able to "buy" the release of some of these children. The women were ordered to depart with the elderly and children, and the men were split into two groups which were sent in different directions, each accompanied by 10 soldiers. According to his account the men were lined up in two rows, and told to turn their backs. The soldiers then opened fire on the group with automatic weapons. Bodies fell on top of him and he was able to feign death until the soldiers left.

In Izbica village the Serb forces torched houses and tractors. Some refugees reported hearing rumours that elderly people who had been in tractor trailers had been burnt alive. One witness reported later helping to bury bodies that had been burnt practically beyond recognition. The women, elderly and children from Izbica village were forced to march towards Turi_evac and Tušilje. At approximately 3pm, when they had reached a point near Turi_evac, about five kilometres to the south of Izbica, an explosion in the column killed several people, including children, and injured others. Refugees claim the column was shelled, although they say there were no KLA military activities under way in the area. Two of those who died were relatives of Emona Behramaj: Edona Behramaj, aged eight and Ardita Behramaj, aged 15. Emona's 12-year-old daughter Merita Behramaj was injured by the flying debris; three weeks after the incident she showed Amnesty International delegates the scar on her forehead. In the ensuing chaos, Emona Behramaj was separated from some of her children and her sister, who was carrying Emona's two-month-old infant son Çlirim. When Emona

Behramaj talked to Amnesty International delegates in late April, she had only been reunited with two of her children the previous day. She still had no news of the fate of her baby, Çlirim Behramaj, or her sister.

Other villages

In other villages, women who had been separated from the men were at first marched towards the border. Some, however, were told when they arrived at Prizren that they should return to their homes. As the climate of insecurity made many afraid, many of these people gathered in or around Kladernica, either sleeping rough in the mountains or gathering at the local school.

Some of the men who had been rounded up from other villages were taken to the police station at Skënderaj. For example, Haradin Abazi was arrested and forced to march to the police station with a group of men that he estimated to number hundreds. He reported that men were beaten both on the journey and during their detention in the police station. Haradin Abazi was released after five hours, and taken by lorry to the neighbouring town of Klina, from where he eventually made his way to Albania. Hasan Hyseni was also taken to Tušilje where he was held for several days; when he was released he returned to Kladernica, where he met up with his family and hid in the mountains.

Identification and burial: the graves

Serb forces withdrew from Kladernica and Izbica villages on or around 31 March, and ethnic Albanians were again able to move around the area. Some who had witnessed or escaped “disappearances” or executions told the others of scores of victims. Over several days, and working only in the evening or at night when they felt less vulnerable to Serb attacks, ethnic Albanian civilians and KLA soldiers formed groups which attempted to locate, identify, and then bury the victims in Kladernica, Izbica, and other villages in the area. Many of the civilians who took part in these patrols were later expelled to Albania, where they spoke to Amnesty International delegates as well as to journalists and others about the killings.

The grave in Izbica

The largest grave in the Izbica/Kladernica area appears to be in a field in Izbica village. This field belongs to an ethnic Albanian who agreed to make it available as a grave site for the victims from Izbica, who were buried there. Many of the soldiers and civilians who had been hiding in Kladernica came to help identify and bury the dead at Izbica. The burial was recorded on videotape by Leri Loshi, a local doctor, and the tape was eventually smuggled out of Kosovo into Albania at some point during the week of 10 May. The scenes pictured on this video appear consistent with the descriptions given to Amnesty International delegates. An aerial photograph of the grave site in Izbica, which according to the KLA contains the bodies of 151 people, was made public by NATO on 17 April. This photograph shows three rows of what appear to be individual graves, which is consistent with descriptions from ethnic Albanians who helped bury the bodies.

On 6 April 1999 the Kosovapress news agency published a list of the people who had been killed and buried in Izbica, Kladernica, and other villages on the area. Ethnic Albanians report that the majority of bodies buried at Izbica and Kladernica are victims who were summarily executed there. Amnesty International does not have independent information about the manner in which many of the people whose names appear on the list died, or information about when they were last seen alive. Thus, the organization cannot confirm that all were victims of extrajudicial execution or were civilians who were deliberately or indiscriminately killed.

The Kosovapress list of names of individuals buried at Izbica also includes some members of the KLA who reportedly died in an ambush several days after the executions, including Abet Beqiri, a local KLA commander, Enver Bajrami and Dr Zaim Beqiri. The list also includes the names of some women, although witnesses report that only men were separated from the others in the field at Izbica. The organization's researchers in the field are continuing to collect information from those who have first hand information about the events in Izbica, Kladernica, and surrounding villages.

Graves in Kladernica and other villages

Other bodies were found and buried in other places. For instance, burials took place, secretly, by night, and without religious ceremony in the hills around Kladernica village. One man interviewed by Amnesty International reported that he saw a number of bodies lying in the middle of the road between Izbica and Vo_njak where they had fallen, although he himself did not recognize the victims. He said that they had bullet wounds in the back. The following day he helped to bury them in Kastriot village, in this case too without religious ceremonies.

Ethnic Albanians interviewed by Amnesty International also reported that they identified and buried scores of victims who were killed in Kladernica, Kastriot and Trnavce (Tërnovë) villages; their names do not appear on the Kosovapress list.

Amnesty International received reports that there may be more victims in Leo_ina, Vo_njak and Bro_nja (Burojë) villages. However, ethnic Albanians interviewed in April by Amnesty International had not been able to gain access to these villages, as they were under the control of Serbian forces during the period prior to the witnesses' expulsions from Kosovo.

“Disappearances” from the Kladernica school

After a pause of about two weeks, on 12 April, the Serbian forces renewed their attacks. Many displaced ethnic Albanians who had remained in the Drenica area had taken refuge at the school in Kladernica. When Serbian or FRY forces arrived at the school, once again men were separated from the women and the women ordered to leave. Many of the families

interviewed by Amnesty International gave the names of these men - some identified more than 10 men from their immediate or extended family as missing; most reported that hundreds of men in total were detained at this time. The fate of these men remains unclear; at the time when Amnesty International delegates conducted the interviews, at least some were believed to have been released and to be in Kosovo hiding in the mountains or to have joined the KLA. Practically all those who fled to Albania reported being threatened, robbed of money and valuables and having their personal identity documents seized and destroyed police. Similar experiences have been reported by most ethnic Albanians who have fled to Albania.