

AI INDEX: EUR 70/23/99  
1 April 1999

## **PUBLIC STATEMENT**

### **Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – Kosovo Province**

As the number of refugees from Kosovo expelled from their homes or fleeing in fear increases massively, the need to ensure that they receive protection in accordance with international refugee standards becomes ever more acute.

- The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has called an emergency meeting of the Humanitarian Issues Working Group this coming Tuesday, 6 April in Geneva. At this meeting, governments and UNHCR will discuss numerous issues relating to the protection of refugees from Kosovo. Amnesty International feels the following points should be taken into account during the discussions:
- During the crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the countries of Western Europe implemented temporary protection schemes to deal with the influx of refugees. However, temporary protection often did not afford an adequate level of protection against *refoulement*, and in some cases, host countries terminated temporary protection and forcibly returned Bosnian refugees to a situation where their human rights were not adequately ensured.

As was the case in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a large proportion of the people fleeing Kosovo would qualify as refugees under the UN Refugee Convention. The international community should take steps to ensure that asylum seekers from Kosovo are given effective and durable protection against *refoulement*.

Amnesty International has received consistent and credible reports that members of the Yugoslav security forces and paramilitary units have called at houses and apartment blocks, and given the inhabitants a period of a few hours to leave. The orders are accompanied by death threats and ill-treatment.

Recent reports even point to people being expelled from their homes by members of the police or armed forces who then move into the vacated residence. Others describe seeing houses and flats in residential areas in flames as they left the city.

Some of the expulsions appears to have been organized in advance, with those expelled being ordered into trucks or buses; several thousand people have been expelled from their homes in Priština and transported to the Macedonian border in sealed trains. Other have been left to make their own way, many of them on foot. Still others have fled with their families, fearing for their lives.

Several of those expelled or in flight have described executions by paramilitaries or security forces during the journey or when they were expelled, but in the absence of foreign journalists and other international observers it has so far been impossible to verify these accounts.

Many report having to pay large sums of money to be allowed to pass, or being robbed of money and valuables that they were carrying with them. Members of Yugoslav security forces have

also confiscated identity documents before permitting people to cross the border, and removed number plates from cars in what appears to be an attempt prevent them asserting their right to return to their homes.

At least 150,000 people have fled Kosovo for the relative safety of neighbouring Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro in the period since NATO air attacks began on 24 March. Most are exhausted, and some have reportedly died on the way or since crossing the border. The number of those internally displaced who had fled or been driven out previously and are as yet unable to leave the province has been estimated in the tens of thousands. There is grave concern for their safety.

Particularly disturbing are a series of reports describing how men of military age were separated from the women, children and elderly men. It has not proved possible to confirm these reports, but the proportion of men among the refugees crossing the borders out of Kosovo is small.

ENDS.../