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Bosnia-Herzegovina: The “Disappeared”

Himzo Demir- head-teacher: “disappeared” from Višegrad

Almost six years since the end of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina an estimated 17,000 people remain missing. These people - the “disappeared” - come from all ethnic groups, and from all walks of life: some were soldiers, some civilians; they include men, women and children.

Amnesty International calls on all parties to the former conflict, as well as the international community, to take steps to clarify the fate of “disappeared” persons, like Himzo Demir. The organization also calls for those responsible for such “disappearances” to be brought to justice, and for their families to be compensated.

Amnesty International continues to campaign on the issue of the “disappeared” in order to help the relatives of the “disappeared” and to bring to end to the culture of impunity for crimes against international law committed during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Himzo Demir was the head-teacher of Višegrad High School in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and had formerly been a chemistry teacher. He was 54 years old, and married with two sons. At the beginning of the war, the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA) took control of Višegrad, and began the large-scale persecution of the town’s Bosniac [Bosnian Muslim] population. Himzo Demir was summarily sacked from his job, as were many other Bosniacs who held influential positions in the local community. Mr Demir had also served as the head of the local government as a member of the Social Democratic Party (SDP).

At approximately 4pm on 28 May 1992 Himzo Demir was at home with his wife Sadija and one of his sons when five cars surrounded the house, and six or seven people wearing camouflage uniforms came to the door. Mrs Demir believes that these men were members of the “White Eagles”, a paramilitary group operating in eastern Bosnia, but mainly originating from Serbia. They said

that they wanted to take Himzo Demir and his son for questioning. The couple's eldest son was in Sarajevo at the time, but their younger 15-year-old son was with them. Mrs Demir begged the men not to take her son away, and they did not take him.

One member of the group - who was known to the family as one of Mr Demir's former pupils - patted Himzo Demir on the shoulder, saying "You were the best school principal". Others in the group spoke with accents which suggested to Mrs Demir that they came from what is now the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). These men also searched the house for valuables and stole some jewellery that they found. Himzo Demir was driven away in a red "Lada" car and has not been seen since.

Five days after he was taken away, the deputy head of the school where Himzo Demir used to work asked Mrs Demir to provide him with the school's official stamp. Mrs Demir believes that this stamp was needed to stamp certificates for students leaving at the end of that school year. Although Himzo Demir had been sacked, he was officially still the head of the school and would have been required to sign the certificates. She believes that her husband was still alive at this time, but believes that he was killed a few days later.

Mrs Demir asked the local police to help her find her husband, but received no information about the whereabouts of her husband. On 31 May she, and her son, fled from Višegrad and - after a period in hiding - eventually made their way to Goražde which was then controlled by the Bosnian Government, and where they still live.

Amnesty International calls on the Republika Srpska authorities to initiate an investigation into the circumstances of Himzo Demir's "disappearance", to make the findings of this investigation available to Sadija Demir and her family, and to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Background Information

Višegrad is located in the south-eastern part of Bosnia-Herzegovina, bordered on the east by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). According to the 1991 census, the population of almost 25,000 was 63 per cent Muslim and 33 per cent Serb. The JNA took control of Višegrad in April 1992, and was ordered to withdraw from Bosnia-Herzegovina on 28 April 1992 by the President of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević. It took them several weeks to do so, and they left their weapons with Bosnian Serb forces in the area. These Bosnian Serb forces were complemented by several paramilitary formations, some of which came from the FRY. In addition to "disappearances" and abductions, human rights abuses reportedly committed by Bosnian Serb forces in the Višegrad area included deliberate and arbitrary killings, and arbitrary detention -including detention organized for the purpose of rape - torture, and forcible expulsion.¹ By July 1992 most of the Bosniac population had fled or had been forcibly expelled from the area.

Višegrad is now predominantly populated by displaced Serbs, most of whom used to live in the Federation, particularly Sarajevo, before the war. Few of the pre-war Bosniac inhabitants have returned as they believe that many of those thought to have committed war crimes in Višegrad still are at large in the area.

¹Paramilitary troops based in Višegrad are also alleged to have taken part in the "disappearance" of 21 passengers from a train travelling briefly through Bosnia on its way from Belgrade to Bar in Montenegro in February 1993.