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Federal Republic of Yugoslavia: Release of Prisoner of conscience - Let's keep up the momentum!

Amnesty International welcomes the release by President Kostunica of the Kosovar humanitarian Dr Flora Brovina from a Serbian prison this afternoon. Ten other Kosovar Albanian prisoners, who had been held without charge or trial for over 15 months were also released last weekend.

Amnesty International identified Flora Brovina as a prisoner of conscience and campaigned - along with other international organizations - for her release. She was arrested in Pristina in April 1999 and later sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment for 'terrorism' and 'association for the purposes of hostile activity'. A retrial had been ordered after an appeal.

"The release of Flora Brovina and other prisoners is a welcome step, but only one of many necessary to address the myriad human rights concerns in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia", Amnesty International said today.

"The next step must be the urgent release of other prisoners of conscience in Serbian jails", the organization added.

Over 850 Kosovar Albanians are jailed in Serbia and were among the estimated 2,000 transferred from Kosovo in June 1999. Amnesty International believes that there are many prisoners of conscience among them.

Other ethnic Albanian prisoners may be released when a new amnesty bill - commissioned by Kostunica and currently being drafted by

a domestic human rights organization - is implemented. The involvement of a human rights organization is a welcome development in itself.

Amnesty International urges the authorities to speedily enact the amnesty bill into law, as information suggests it will bring about the release of prisoners of conscience, conscientious objectors and deserters and the re-examination of unfair trials. Many other human right violations related to the former administration remain to be addressed, including the fate of least 3,000 people who have gone missing since the start of the Kosovo crisis in 1998.

Background

Some 2,000 ethnic Albanian prisoners were originally transferred from Kosovo to Serbia in June 1999. More than 1,000 have been released after charges were dropped or sentences served. Large sums of money was allegedly paid in many cases to secure their release. The information available to Amnesty International about the Kosovar Albanians in Serbian prisons is that many, perhaps the majority, were detained simply because they were ethnic Albanians, and not because they had participated in the armed conflict. The organization believes that many are thus prisoners of conscience. Reports of the trials show little evidence to link them with the charges of "terrorism" or similar which were brought against them. The trials were characterized by violations of the right to a fair trial, such as denial of a court decision for their detention, denial of access to lawyers and adequate facilities to prepare a defence. The prisoners were frequently brutally beaten or tortured during the initial stages of detention.

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