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Bosnia and Herzegovina: some welcome progress on missing persons

Amnesty International welcomes the progress made in exhumations in Prijedor in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), where the remains of around 430 individuals have been exhumed, including 275 complete bodies.

They are believed to be the remains of Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats killed in 1992.

Exhumations at the sites at Tomasica, part of the Ljubija iron ore mines near Prijedor (Republika Srpska), have been ongoing since September, after information was provided to the State Prosecutor of Bosnia and Herzegovina by a former member of the Bosnian Serb Army.

The discovery of so many bodies, is a significant development in resolving the fate of the disappeared and missing. Over 1,000 missing persons from the Prijedor area are still unaccounted for.

Earlier this year, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross, more than 7,886 relatives of the estimated 22,438 people who were reported missing in the armed conflict in BiH, had yet to be provided with any information about the fate of their family member.

Thousands of Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats in the area were taken to the Omarska detention camp, which was situated in the Ljubija mines complex. In Omarska, torture and mass killings were carried out.

The first reports on the presence of mass burial sites in the Ljubija mines complex appeared in 1994, when the UN Commission of Experts, in an annex on mass graves in its report on violations of international humanitarian law committed in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, reported that the mines in Omarska, Tomašica and Ljubija contained a great number of bodies of victims of the fighting in the Prijedor area, as well as of those who were killed during detention. Some exhumations took place between 2001-2005, but many of the bodies found still remain to be identified.

Both former Bosnian Serb Colonel General Ratko Mladić and Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić, currently on trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, have been indicted crimes against humanity (persecutions, extermination, murder, deportation, inhumane acts), in the Prijedor area. Local Bosnian Serb politicians continue to deny the existence of mass graves in the area.

Further information

In 2006, Amnesty International published a report *Bosnia and Herzegovina - Behind closed gates: ethnic discrimination in employment*, which focussed on the Ljubija iron ore mines near Prijedor. At the beginning of the war the then state-owned company came under the control of the local Bosnian Serb de facto authorities. The new management of the Ljubija mines systematically

discriminated against at least 2,000 non-Serb workers, by dismissing them en masse solely because of their ethnicity. Many former workers were taken to the Omarska detention camp.

The remaining unfairly dismissed Ljubija workers were not reinstated in their jobs, nor received other forms of reparation. In 2004 the international corporation LNM Holdings (now part of Mittal Steel) signed a joint-venture agreement to establish a new company, the New Ljubija Mines, which includes the site at Omarska.

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International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK

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