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Macedonia must prevent homophobic attacks

Saturday's attack against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) activists in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, yet again underscores the urgent need for protection in law against homophobic and transphobic violence and any other form of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, said Amnesty International today.

On 20 April, activists from the NGOs, LGBT United and the Coalition for the Sexual and Health Rights of Marginalized Communities were attacked by a group of football supporters in the Macedonian town of Bitola.

The activists, carrying a rainbow flag, had been in the main street of the town, carrying flags and placards and distributing posters on the rights of LGBTI people, as part of a project - "Civic initiative for LGBT Rights". Three of the activists were attacked by four men, who were later joined by three others. The attackers violently grabbed their posters, and used them to hit the activists on their heads and faces. They subjected the activists to verbal abuse, spat and pushed them around. When an activist attempted to use his mobile phone to call for help, one of the attackers grabbed it and threw it to the ground, threatening to kill him.

As soon as the perpetrators left the activists immediately reported the attack to the police, and called on the Ministry of Interior police to immediately trace the perpetrators and bring them to justice.

Following the attack the LGBT United group received several threats of physical attacks, some amounting to death threats, on its Facebook page. A photo of the activists was also posted on the official Facebook page of the Macedonian Sport Fans' group, with the message: "Never again will faggots step foot in Bitola".

This is the latest episode of violence against LGBTI people in Macedonia. In October, the LGBTI support centre in Skopje was attacked, and in November in advance of a march on Tolerance Day, LGBT activists were attacked in the capital Skopje.

The Macedonian authorities have so far failed to include protection from discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity in its legislation. Nor is there any provision in law for the investigation and prosecution of hate crimes, including on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Amnesty International urges the Macedonian authorities to ensure that prompt, impartial and effective investigations are opened into the recent attack in Bitola and any attacks on the lives or property of LGBTI individuals or organizations. Any alleged homophobic or transphobic hate motive should be thoroughly investigated and alleged perpetrators should be brought to trial in fair proceedings.

The government should immediately take measures to amend anti-discrimination legislation so as to include sexual orientation and gender identity as specific grounds for discrimination. Further, in

the absence of legislation prohibiting hate crime, the government should, without further delay and in consultation with LGBT organizations, introduce such legislation, specifically including hate crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as ethnicity, race, gender and other grounds recognized in international standards.

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