

EXTERNAL

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ALBANIA: Police ill-treatment of the journalist Fatos Veliu

Fatos Veliu, aged 30, from Saranda town in southern Albania, is a journalist working for *Koha Jone*, an independent daily newspaper published in Tirana which frequently carries articles which are very critical of the ruling party and of President Sali Berisha, formerly Leader of the Democratic Party (DP).

On 14 February 1996 an article by Fatos Veliu with the headline "Four robberies in two nights" was published in *Koha Jone*, in which he reportedly exposed corruption in the town's police force.

Two days later, on 16 February at about 2pm, he was arrested and taken to Saranda police station. Here he was reportedly taken into the office of the police chief who punched and kicked him, complaining that Fatos Veliu was seeking to "denigrate" the work of the police and had never written about their good work. He was released without charge about two hours later, severely bruised. The Saranda police also reportedly confiscated his reporter's notepad, which they had still not returned to him by 4 March 1996.

A medical certificate issued by a forensic specialist in Saranda who examined Fatos Veliu on 20 February 1996 recorded that the area around both eyes was severely bruised ("bruises (6x4cm) the colour of black cherries") and that there was bruising also on his right lower leg. The patient complained of pain in these areas and also of dizziness. The certificate states that these bruises were caused by beating with a hard instrument.

According to Fatos Veliu it was over two weeks before the marks of bruising had disappeared.

On 23 February 1996 the Association of Professional Journalists of Albania issued a statement condemning the beating of Fatos Veliu, which it said reflected "unbridled official arrogance towards the independent and opposition press". The Association called on the authorities to take "stern legal measures against those who instructed and carried out this beating. The Albanian state today possesses the necessary legal framework both to refute false reports and to institute criminal punishment for cases of libel in the press. When the truncheon is used instead of the law, the rule of law is dead..."

Background

In the run-up to national elections (to be held later this year) official hostility to independent and to opposition press has increased. The newspaper *Koha Jone*, in particular, has been the target of a campaign in the state-controlled media which has accused the newspaper, and the leading opposition party, the Socialist Party, of being financed by neighbouring Serbia and of links with Serb agents. *Koha Jone* has experienced repeated harassment and intimidation by the authorities: on 26 January armed police officers prevented distribution of the newspaper, which has the largest circulation in Albania, and seized five distribution vehicles. A journalist, Altin Hazizaj, was detained on 31 January when covering the forcible eviction by police of illegal squatters in a Tirana suburb and held for two days before a court ordered his release on bail. On 26 February, following a bomb explosion in Tirana in which four people were killed and some 25 others injured, police reportedly went to the offices of *Koha Jone* and arrested all 33 people who were present, including the publisher, editors, journalists, computer operators and a cleaner. They were reportedly arrested without warrant and taken to a police station where they were questioned about what they were doing at the time of the explosion and asked other questions such as how much they earned. Each person was reportedly questioned for some 20 minutes and then released.

For further background information, please refer to Amnesty International's report, *Albania: Failure to end police ill-treatment and deaths in custody* (AI Index: EUR 11/04/95) issued in June 1995.