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APPEAL FOR VUKOVAR HOSPITAL PATIENTS DETAINED BY
THE YUGOSLAV NATIONAL ARMY IN NOVEMBER 1991

Following the fall of Vukovar on 18 November 1991 to Yugoslav National Army (JNA) forces, about 440 patients and 320 hospital staff from Vukovar hospital were reportedly detained by JNA troops. About 400 civilians were in the hospital grounds at the time, where they had taken refuge; many of these were also arrested. Among those detained were Dr Vesna Bosanac, aged 42, a specialist in paediatrics, the acting head of Vukovar hospital during the three-month siege of the town by JNA forces, and her assistant, Dr Juraj Njavro. Although it had been agreed that the evacuation of Vukovar hospital would be supervised by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the JNA reportedly broke this agreement and ejected ICRC representatives from the hospital.

Dr Bosanac, Dr Njavro and a number of other doctors and patients from Vukovar hospital were released on 10 December 1991 in prisoner exchanges. Dr Njavro and several other doctors subsequently made statements about the ill-treatment and harsh conditions they and other prisoners had experienced in JNA detention (see below).

However, 185 patients (including wounded members of the Croatian Army) and 38 auxilliary staff from Vukovar hospital have reportedly remained detained. The Croatian authorities have established through contacts with the JNA and through the ICRC that some are detained in various detention centres in Serbia, mainly in Sremska Mitrovica and Niš prisons. The whereabouts and fate of others remains unknown, and it is feared that some may have been killed following their capture by JNA and Serbian paramilitary forces.

Among those whose fate remains unknown is the journalist Siniša Glavaševi_, aged 31, a journalist for Radio Vukovar. He was in the hospital at the time of his arrest because he had been wounded. (Picture of Siniša Glavaševi_ below)

Amnesty International calls for the release of all the patients in Vukovar hospital detained on 20 November 1991 who have neither used nor advocated violence and who have not been charged with a recognizably criminal offence. The organization also asks that lawyers, relatives and doctors be given prompt and regular access to detainees. It is concerned about reports that people detained in connection with the conflict in Yugoslavia have been tortured or ill-treated and urges that investigations be conducted into these reports and that those responsible for abuses be brought to justice.

Amnesty International also calls on the Yugoslav federal authorities to make known the whereabouts of all missing persons arrested or abducted by forces over which they have authority.

For further information please refer to Amnesty International's report of March 1992: Yugoslavia - Further reports of torture and deliberate and arbitrary killings in war zones (EUR 48/13/92) and in particular to pages 13 to 22, or to the following extract from this report concerning statements by Dr Njavro, who was detained in Sremska Mitrovica prison in the Vojvodina. It should be noted that the camps of Begejci and Staji_evo (see pages 14 to 20 of report) have been closed, and that the conditions and treatment of prisoners held in Sremska Mitrovica are said to have improved.

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(EXTRACT FROM AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S REPORT OF MARCH 1992: Yugoslavia - Further reports of torture and deliberate and arbitrary killings in war zones (EUR 48/13/92))

Sremska Mitrovica prison

Torture and Ill-treatment

According to Dr Juraj Njavro:

"When entering the camp for the first time, practically all prisoners were beaten, irrespective of their age, except for women and children. Even severe injuries were inflicted. This can be confirmed by all prisoners who were held in room No. 5 of Pavilion III. Women and children were in a separate room. After being brutally beaten, male prisoners were made to undress; they were left naked while all their belongings were taken away (money, watches, documents, jewelry, as well as other metal objects irrespective of their size or purpose, belts and similar things). When they left the camp these belongings were generally returned to them, but it has to be pointed out that most of the money and jewelry was never returned - moreover, no prisoner dared to ask for it because they had been previously threatened: `If you just mention this to anybody you will be killed!'"

"The day after arrest prisoners had to complete a questionnaire [containing personal details]...The same day prisoners were twice obliged to make a statement in front of TV cameras. Several days later they were all forced to put on military uniforms over their dirty and ragged civilian clothes - the reason for this was to enable the army to accuse them in front of the ICRC and other international organizations of being members of military formations (so it would seem that they were real prisoners of war and not innocent civilians). From the beginning, some prisoners were repeatedly investigated and questioned ("to clarify the circumstances and events concerning Vukovar"). If the investigators were not satisfied with the answers they received, they insisted on their view of events and on their own interpretations - some prisoners were continually beaten (with sticks, or they were kicked repeatedly in the ribs, belly and legs, or their heads were repeatedly banged against the walls). I myself was not beaten."

"Interrogations were always conducted "in confidence". Collaboration was offered to some prisoners - the reward was supposed to be release from prison or some privileges within the camp. After interrogation, prisoners always had to write and sign a statement (while I was in the camp, 10 to 15 people from my room underwent this process; others were told there was plenty of time and their turn would come). Some prisoners whom the JNA regarded as important were interrogated several times a day - I was also interrogated several times a day for 15 days. I have to say that JNA officers personally told me that it was forbidden to ill-treat prisoners, but this was not the case in reality, especially if the prisoners were members of the Croatian police, Croatian National Guard or territorial defence. Some men were held in isolation cells (Josip Tomaši_ and Marin Vidi_-Bili, who was the government's representative for the municipality of Vukovar). Some prisoners were denied medical care."

Conditions

"After entering the camp, prisoners (beaten, dishevelled, covered with their own blood, dust and mud) were pushed into rooms with wooden floors but no beds. In each room (about 50 square metres) 100 prisoners were held, so that they were unable to sleep normally - instead they had to sleep on the floor like "sardines in a can". There was a small cubicle with running water at the entrance to the room, but only with cold water - there were no soap, towels, toilet paper or detergent - this water was usable only for drinking. The rooms were equipped with central heating, but a bright light was kept turned on throughout the night (in a few rooms the light was dimmed). Several days later each prisoner received a mattress, a blanket, towel, soap and toilet paper. Even minimal personal hygiene was obstructed (we could not bath or wash underwear, there was no warm water or detergent)."

"For breakfast we were given a slice of hard, several-days-old bread, a small sausage or a piece of meat from a can. There was never tea or white coffee. For lunch it was usually cabbage, beans, or goulash, but always too salty, too spicy or too acid; we were given the same for supper."

Medical care

"I ran a small medical station within the camp; at first all kinds of medicines were lacking, although there were enough bandages...for the treatment of wounds. Later, medicines were supplied according to need. The most frequent illnesses (besides chronic illnesses in the case of people over 70) were infections of the upper respiratory tract, pneumonia, urinary infections and

different psychological or psychiatric disturbances...The representatives of the ICRC visited the camp, interviewed the prisoners and took their written statements; but the JNA officers succeeded in hiding some prisoners (whom they regarded as especially interesting) from the ICRC."