

EXTERNAL

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EXTRA 72/97 Ill-treatment / Fear of further ill-treatment

19 May 1997

CROATIAD.B., I.N., I.M., Jovanka Reli_ (f, 61), Milan Velja_a (69), Milka Maljkovi_ (f, 65), Ljuba Borojevi_ (f, 60), Jovan Borojevi_ (71), and other Croatian Serbs

According to the Croatian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights (HHO) and other human rights organizations, several Croatian Serbs and others were ill-treated by police on 14 May 1997 in Hrvatska Kostajnica. The ill-treatment occurred in the wake of an anti-Serb riot the previous day by Bosnian Croat refugees who have been settled in the area. Local officials have failed to condemn the riot, in which Croatian Serb houses in at least four villages were systematically vandalised and more than 30 people reportedly brutally beaten, and instead blamed the Croatian Serbs for "causing" the violence. Under these circumstances, Amnesty International fears further violence against Croatian Serbs in the area.

HHO reports that at least four people who had been victims of the riot on 13 May were arrested and taken to the local police station, where at least three of them were ill-treated. On 14 May, two Croatian Serb men from Gornji Bjelovac, I.N. and I.M., were reportedly taken to the police station in Hrvatska Kostajnica and beaten during questioning about their alleged possession of arms. I.N. was forced to recite a Roman Catholic prayer (Serbs follow the Orthodox Christian faith). The same day, police also arrested and beat D.B., an ethnic Croat who had returned with his family from Eastern Slavonia on 13 May. During the riots on 13 May D.B. had been beaten, forced to eat dirt, and a Bosnian Croat had threatened him while forcing a pistol into his mouth. A Croatian Serb man, Lj. I., was arrested and detained for 11 hours reportedly for failing to produce identity documents which had been destroyed by Bosnian Croats.

Police presence increased in the village after the riots, and according to HHO, there was a significant military presence in the village while they were visiting the area on 15 May. Despite the increased police presence there were further attacks on Croatian Serbs. In Knezovljani village, Jovanka Reli_, who is disabled and confined to a wheelchair, was reportedly beaten by a group of people on 14 May, as was her husband Milan Reli_, who tried to protect her. The same night, Milan Velja_a and Milka Maljkovi_, an elderly couple also from Knezovljani, were beaten with sticks and plastic rods. One assailant beat Milan Velja_a on the head with a hammer. His wounds were still bleeding when he was interviewed the next day by human rights monitors.

On 15 May, HHO representatives and a United States diplomat interviewed Ljuba and Jovan Borojevi_, an elderly couple from Umeti_ village, whose house had been vandalized by the mob, but who themselves had escaped ill-treatment. When the monitors returned later that day, the couple told them that 15 minutes after they had left, the couple had been attacked by a group of people who threw them to the ground, stamped on them, and threatened them because they had spoken to the monitors. Both had visible injuries and were taken to hospital for medical treatment.

HHO reported that on 19 May an additional 10 Croatian Serbs were expelled from the area.

The police in Hrvatska Kostajnica reportedly detained three Bosnian Croats in connection with the attacks on Croatian Serbs, but they were later released after being charged with a minor offence. On 15 May, the Prefect of the

Sisak-Moslavina County failed to condemn the attacks, instead objecting that the spontaneous return of Croatian Serb refugees "is something that no country can allow to happen." On 16 May, he was quoted by a Croatian news agency as saying the violence had been "caused by the Serb refugees."

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Hrvatska Kostajnica and surrounding villages are located in territory which from 1991 until 1995 was held by rebel Croatian Serbs. The area was retaken by Croatian government forces in August 1995; most Croatian Serbs left, many going to Eastern Slavonia, the last area in Croatia held by the rebel Croatian Serbs. This area, under United Nations' administration, is due to be transferred back to Croatian control by January 1998. On 24 April 1997, the Croatian Government approved an Agreement on the Operational Procedures of Return, which established mechanisms for both Croatian Serbs from other parts of Croatia and internally displaced Croatians from Eastern Slavonia to return to their homes.

On 13 May 1997 a group of 10 Croatian Serb internally displaced people spontaneously returned to the town of Gornji Bjelovac from Beli Manastir (Eastern Slavonia), outside the agreed procedure. A rumour reportedly spread among the Bosnian Croats in the area that more Croatian Serbs were expected, whereupon a group of over 100 people assembled, armed with sticks and firearms, and proceeded to vandalize Serb houses in Gornji Bjelovac, Knezovljani, Umeti_ and Me_en_ani village.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in Croatian, German, English or your own language:

- expressing concern that public statements by local officials appear to have condoned reported attacks by Bosnian Croat refugees on 14 May against Croatian Serbs in villages near Hrvatska Kostajnica, and noting that despite police intervention further attacks are reported to have occurred;
- expressing concern that police reportedly detained and ill-treated D.B., I.M, and I.N, in violation of Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR);
- calling for an investigation into the allegations of police ill-treatment and for anyone found responsible, as well as the Bosnian Croats responsible for the attacks on Croatian Serbs, to be brought to justice;
- urging the Croatian authorities to ensure that areas where there are vulnerable populations are adequately policed.

Croatian authorities frequently respond to letters written by members of Amnesty International. If you receive a response to your letter which does not respond to the concerns about ill-treatment in detention, please write back again, citing the individual cases above.

APPEALS TO:

President of the Republic of Croatia

Dr Franjo Tudjman

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Telegrams: President Tudjman, Zagreb, Croatia

Fax: +385 1 4565 256 or 4565 299

Salutation: Dear President

Minister of Internal Affairs

Ivan Peni_

Ministar

Ministarstvo za unutrašnje poslove Republike Hrvatske

Savska cesta 39

10000 Zagreb, Croatia

Telegrams: Minister Interior, Zagreb, Croatia**Fax: +385 1 443 715****Salutation: Dear Minister****Police Commissioner of Sisak-Moslavina County**

Vladimir Milankovi_

Na_elnik policijske uprave Sisa_ke-Moslava_ke _upanije

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Fax: +385 44 560 281**Salutation: Dear Mr. Milankovi_****Prefect of Sisak-Moslavina County**

Djuro Brodarac

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Fax +385 44 524 158**Salutation: Dear Mr. Brodarac****COPIES TO:** diplomatic representatives of Croatia accredited to your country.**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 20 June 1997.