

Macedonia (FYROM): Amnesty International urges respect for  
human rights of all communities

"All parties to the escalating conflict in Macedonia must respect the human rights of the Macedonian, Albanian and minority communities", said Amnesty International today as the Macedonian military prepares today for a major attack on ethnic Albanian armed groups surrounding the city of Tetovo.

Amnesty International expressed its concern at the recent escalation of violence in Macedonia, and cautioned all parties involved to respect international human rights and humanitarian law which forbids the murder and torture of civilians, and the taking of hostages. "After almost 10 years of continuous war in the region, neither the people of Macedonia nor the wider region want to see a repetition of the human rights violations associated with armed conflict", Amnesty International stated.

The organization's current principal concern is for the increasing numbers of people who are seeking refuge from the violence by leaving Macedonia. "The primary victims of previous wars in the region have been civilians - over two million of whom are still displaced from their homes or live as refugees without a durable solution. Although there have been no deliberate attacks to date on civilians in Macedonia, refugees - including a large number of women and children - are already fleeing Macedonia to seek international protection from the anticipated human rights violations".

The majority of refugees are ethnic Albanians who have fled the region around Tetovo; unconfirmed numbers of Macedonians have also left the area heading for Skopje, the capital of Macedonia. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that an estimated 1,600 refugees have crossed the border into Albania - some heading for Italy - while a further 480 people have entered Kosovo. Unconfirmed reports from the Serbian Red Cross suggest that an estimated 1,500 people have fled to southern Serbia, apparently on their way to Bosnia and Croatia, while Bulgarian government sources have reported that up to 2,000 people - mainly women and children - have entered Bulgaria on their way to Turkey.

Background

Violent attacks have increased in the country since the killing of a Macedonian policeman during a grenade attack on the police station at Tearce on 22 January 2001. A previously unknown armed opposition group - the National Liberation Army (NLA) - claimed responsibility for the incident. Subsequent clashes between armed groups of ethnic Albanians and the Macedonian security force near Tanusevci, in which three Macedonian soldiers were killed led to the Macedonian government's closure of the country's borders and saw the violence spread to Tetovo, a predominantly ethnic Albanian city in western Macedonia.

\ENDS

public document

\*\*\*\*\*

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>