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## **The truth behind the killings of 45 ethnic Albanians in Kosovo must be found**

Those responsible for killing some 45 ethnic Albanians in Ra\_ak village on 15 January 1999 may never be brought to justice unless independent investigators are immediately allowed to do their work, Amnesty International said today.

The organization also expressed fears for the safety of the villagers still in Ra\_ak, and in at least two surrounding villages to which the recent violence seems to have spread.

The victims' bodies -- including three women, a 12-year-old child and several elderly men -- were found on 16 January 1999 by members of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Verification Mission, in and around Ra\_ak, less than 30 kilometres south of the capital, Priština.

"This brutal crime is chillingly similar to the first reports of large-scale killings of ethnic Albanian civilians, less than one year ago," Amnesty International said. "The truth about what happened then was never established, and those responsible are therefore still free."

"If history is not to repeat itself it is essential to find out what happened in Ra\_ak on 15 January and bring those responsible to justice."

"Given the present situation in Kosovo, domestic investigations cannot be regarded as impartial. The authorities should therefore do everything in their power to protect the site of the killings, and to preserve the victims' bodies to allow for thorough independent and impartial autopsies to be performed," Amnesty International said.

Many of the victims had reportedly been shot through the head at close range and some showed signs of mutilation.

The victims appeared to be local villagers, possibly with some members of the ethnic Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) among them. They had been caught up in last week's renewed fighting between the KLA and Serbian security forces in the Štimlje-Uroševac area.

As villagers fled their homes, some men were reportedly arrested by Serbian police and taken to the Štimlje police station. Amnesty International is extremely concerned that those arrested may be tortured and ill-treated in police custody and is urging the authorities to protect them.

"We also strongly urge the Serbian and Federal Yugoslav authorities to abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect the civilian population, both in Ra\_ak and in surrounding villages, and to ensure that their security forces do the same," Amnesty International said.

Attempts by the Priština district investigating magistrate, Danica Marinkovi\_, to investigate the scene of the killings on 17 January failed, apparently because the area was still too

dangerous. On 18 January, Serbian police forces, stationed on hillsides overlooking the village, reportedly resumed firing at Ra\_ak village.

On 18 January, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia, Louise Arbour, was stopped at the border between the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and banned from entering the country. The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia has denied Tribunal investigators access for the past 10 months, claiming that the Tribunal has no jurisdiction over its territory.

"The authorities should cooperate fully with the independent investigators, and provide them with all information concerning the police and security forces' operations," Amnesty International said.

### **Background**

Over 2,000 people died after armed conflict erupted in Kosovo province in February 1998. Many of them were extra-judicially executed or deliberately and arbitrarily killed. Some 700 people, the majority ethnic Albanians but also including over a hundred Serbs, remain unaccounted for.

At least 1,000 ethnic Albanians were detained by the Serbian authorities in 1998. Amnesty International has evidence that many of them were tortured or ill-treated in custody. As many as five may have died in 1998 as a result of injuries sustained during brutal interrogations. Many of the detainees are currently being tried even though there is no solid evidence to support the charges against them.

The October 1998 cease-fire markedly reduced violence in Kosovo. The international OSCE "Verification Mission" has acknowledged that monitoring respect for human rights is part of its mission. However, only 700 of the envisaged 1,400 mission members have been deployed in the province to date, and those in the field have experienced great difficulties in carrying out their mandate.

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