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Violence sweeps through Kosovo province: international effort needed now to prevent further killings and beatings

The shooting of at least 16 ethnic Albanians in Kosovo province at the weekend and the beating of hundreds of ethnic Albanians who demonstrated at this news raises the spectre of the repeat of the gross human rights violations in the former Yugoslavia which horrified the world in recent years.

Amnesty International is calling for the international community, particularly the European Union and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), to make concerted efforts to see that allegations are investigated and the developing situation is monitored.

The police and security forces must respect international law enforcement standards which prohibit the intentional lethal use of firearms except when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.

Yesterday, police broke up peaceful demonstrations in Priština and other towns, using tear-gas, water cannons and truncheons. Hundreds of demonstrators, who appeared to have been largely peaceful, were beaten. Demonstrators were reportedly chased from the streets into offices and houses.

The demonstrations arose in response to the killing of at least 16 ethnic Albanians during the weekend. Although 16 victims have been acknowledged by the Serbian authorities, ethnic Albanians report the return of 22 bodies for burial. Although some of the dead may well have been men engaged in armed attacks on the police, Amnesty International believes allegations from ethnic Albanian sources that some of the victims were civilians not involved in the fighting are credible and that it is absolutely essential that they are thoroughly and properly investigated. Four police officers were also reportedly killed during the conflict.

Given the tense situation it is important to ensure impartiality of such investigations and involve representatives of the international community. Moreover, it is clear that further events in Kosovo province must be subject to intense international scrutiny.

On 28 February police reportedly clashed with members of the UÇK (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës* - Kosovo Liberation Army) in the village of Likošane, near Glogovac town. Two police officers and five Albanians were killed. Serbian sources allege that the police were initially ambushed by armed ethnic Albanians. Ethnic Albanians claim that at least seven ethnic Albanians, and possibly many more, were shot in _irez village near the town of Srbica the same day. The police allegedly shot some of the victims from helicopters before moving in with armoured vehicles. The victims allegedly included a pregnant woman, and four brothers from another family in the village. Both _irez and Likošane are in the Drenica region, where UÇK

activity is strongest, and where police have restricted their movements in recent months because of earlier clashes with armed ethnic Albanians.

Serbian press and government sources have been alleging that there have been further attacks on Serbs, including civilians, in some cases resulting in people being injured.

Amnesty International recognizes that the authorities may have to use force when responding to violent attacks upon them, but such force must be only that which is strictly necessary and no more than to the extent required in the performance of these duties. It is alarmed that the police have used brutal tactics to break up peaceful demonstrations. The organization is urgently calling on the Serbian authorities to initiate a thorough, prompt and impartial investigation into the beatings and shootings, and to ensure that any police officers found to be responsible for beating demonstrators or unlawfully killing or wounding people be held to account for their actions.

An unknown number of people have been arrested in the course of the fighting and the demonstrations. Amnesty International also fears that arrested ethnic Albanians, both those alleged to have been involved in terrorist acts, and those involved in the demonstrations, will be subject to torture and ill-treatment in detention as has happened so frequently in the province. It is urging the Serbian authorities to ensure that the defendants are protected, particularly by ensuring that they be given full access to defence lawyers, family and, where necessary, medical treatment. The organization also fears that any eventual trials of the detainees will also be grossly unfair.

Background Information

In July 1990 the Serbian parliament suspended the Kosovo parliament and government after ethnic Albanian deputies of the Kosovo parliament declared Kosovo independent of the Republic of Serbia. Since then, the majority of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo province (where they constitute around 90 per cent of the population) refuse to recognize Serbia's authority in the province and a number of "parallel" institutions have been established by ethnic Albanians.

The leaders of the main ethnic Albanian parties in Kosovo province have advocated the province's secession by peaceful means only. However since 1996 violent attacks on Serbian police and Serbs or Albanians associated with the authorities have occurred with increasing frequency. Responsibility for many of these incidents has been claimed by the clandestine organization, the UÇK. Since certain clashes with the UÇK in late November 1997 police have reportedly restricted their movements in certain parts of the province, which have been dubbed the "liberated territory" by ethnic Albanians. The new clashes may herald police operations to reestablish their control in these areas.
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