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Kosovo: KFOR and UNMIK fail to uphold human rights standards in Mitrovica

The continuing wave of ethnic violence that erupted in the divided city of Mitrovica in February this year, underscores the failure of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the NATO-led KFOR to halt human rights abuses and find lasting solutions to the problems in Kosovo, Amnesty International said in a new report issued today.

"Mitrovica is a microcosm of the problems facing UNMIK and KFOR throughout Kosovo," Amnesty International said. "Their response to the violence in Mitrovica is illustrative of a wider failure by the international presence in Kosovo to consistently administer justice and uphold human rights standards in the exercise of their duties."

In the report compiled by its Kosovo-based field researchers, the human rights organization highlights its concerns relating to the response of KFOR and UNMIK to the shooting that broke out in north Mitrovica on 13 February, during which two French KFOR soldiers were injured.

As a result of the gun-fights which followed, Avni Hajredini, a resident of Mitrovica, was shot and killed in circumstances which remain disputed and 49 people, including two juveniles, were detained by French KFOR soldiers, some for up to five days.

The 49 people who were detained were not told of the reasons for their detention, or informed of their rights, and their families were not notified as to their whereabouts. Additionally, the detainees were not given access to lawyers even though they were all questioned by KFOR and UNMIK.

Fourteen of the detainees, who were held for a period of five days, were not brought promptly before a judge and there were no procedures in place by which they could challenge the lawfulness of their detention. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the initial detention of all of these persons was, in fact, in accordance with international human rights standards.

All the detainees were held in a freezing and unsanitary gymnasium. One KFOR legal adviser said to Amnesty International's field researchers who visited the gymnasium that, "no one should be held in such conditions for longer than 12 hours".

The events surrounding the death of Avni Hajredini also remain contested with conflicting reports and retracted statements from KFOR as to how he died and who killed him.

"KFOR and UNMIK should immediately initiate an independent and impartial investigation into the killing to determine who shot Avni Hajredini and in what circumstances," Amnesty International urged.

"Until the true version of the events that led to his death is established, controversy will remain and KFOR runs the risk of losing the trust of the communities which it was deployed to protect in Kosovo."

Although Amnesty International recognizes the complex nature of the tasks which the international community faces in Kosovo, UNMIK and KFOR have a responsibility to uphold the highest standards of human rights at all times, regardless of the situation. The organization is concerned that the events of 13 February demonstrate that UNMIK and KFOR are failing to consistently respect international human rights standards when engaging in law enforcement operations in Kosovo.

Amnesty International continues to urge KFOR and UNMIK to establish immediately independent and impartial mechanisms to ensure that allegations of human rights abuses are effectively investigated and the victims or victims' families are compensated.

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For more information or to receive a copy of the report, "*Setting the standard? UNMIK and KFOR's response to the violence in Mitrovica*", please call Amnesty International's field researchers, Liz Griffin or Shelley Inglis, in Kosovo, on + 381 38 542 282 or + 44 374 486 141 (UK cellphone) or the press office in London, UK, on + 44 171 413 5566.

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