

News Service: 060/99

AI INDEX: EUR 70/18/99
26 March 1999

PUBLIC STATEMENT

FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF YUGOSLAVIA – KOSOVO

HUMAN RIGHTS CRISIS DEEPENS -- MILITARY INTELLIGENCE MAY BE VITAL DETERRENT

Amnesty International has just learned the tragic news of the killing of the prominent ethnic Albanian human rights lawyer Bajram Kelmendi and his two sons -- one of whom is a minor -- who had been taken from their home in Priština by Serbian police in the early hours of 25 March.

The organization condemns their deliberate and arbitrary killings and calls on the Federal Yugoslav authorities to investigate this serious human rights violation as a matter of extreme urgency.

Meanwhile, allegations of further human rights violations by Serbian police or the Yugoslav Army outside Priština are mounting. These include claims from ethnic Albanian sources that a substantial number of ethnic Albanians who have taken shelter in the village of Ćirez in the Drenica region have been surrounded by Yugoslav Army tanks in an effort to deter NATO attacks. It is currently impossible to confirm these allegations.

Should they be confirmed, this would constitute a violation of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 -- to which the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia is a party -- which prohibit the taking of hostages, whether civilians or combatants hors de combat.

Monitoring the situation in the area is becoming increasingly difficult as the main international monitoring mission, that of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, withdrew its observers last week as a result of the increased likelihood of a military intervention by NATO.

In addition, foreign journalists of NATO member states -- who appeared to make up the bulk of the foreign press corps -- have either been expelled by the authorities or have withdrawn for fear for their own security.

In the absence of international observers on the ground in Kosovo, Amnesty International calls upon states with substantial reconnaissance and intelligence capabilities to monitor the human rights and humanitarian situation in the area, to make public the information available where appropriate, and share fuller details with the relevant international organizations. It may be important that states inside and outside of NATO do this.

Amnesty International believes that it is vital to reveal whether the allegations of violations of humanitarian or human rights law are true or not and to send a clear message that such violations are unacceptable and are being documented. Knowledge that perpetrators may be held accountable is a vital deterrent.

The organization is reiterating its appeals to the authorities to refrain from violating the basic human rights of their citizens and to stop targeting independent journalists, opposition politicians and human rights workers.

The current state of war declared by the government on 24 March should not serve as a pretext to suspend these rights which the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia is bound by international standards to uphold under all circumstances.

Additional information

Earlier unconfirmed reports suggested that Bajram Kelmendi had been released. However, the Belgrade-based Humanitarian Law Centre reported that his body and those of his sons were found just outside Priština on the road to Kosovo Polje. According to a relative of the Kelmendi family, who saw the bodies, the victims had been shot dead. Local police have reportedly initiated an investigation into the killings.

ENDS.../