

0001 hrs gmt Tuesday 12 October 1993

@"MY FAMILY THOUGHT I WAS DEAD"

**HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS CONTINUE IN KOSOVO, FYUGOSLAVIA,
AS AUTHORITIES DENY AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL ACCESS TO REGION**

Kosovo, Yugoslavia. An ethnic Albanian human rights activist is arrested by Serb police officers. He is detained for more than a week and beaten so badly he subsequently needs hospital treatment. "They interrogated me for 48 hours at a stretch," he says later. "My family thought I was dead."

For years Amnesty International has been receiving stories of human rights violations by the Serb police against ethnic Albanians, who form the majority population in Kosovo. Only last year, the human rights organization published a report citing graphic evidence of police beatings, sometimes of women, children or old people. And now the Serb authorities have acted to end international human rights monitoring in the province and have refused access to Amnesty International.

"This is a very disturbing development," said the worldwide human rights organization. "We very much fear that the Serbian authorities have taken this step in an attempt to conceal the abuses taking place daily, instead of taking action to stop them."

Nationalist conflict in the region has already resulted in two years of bloody war, first in Croatia and then Bosnia-Herzegovina. Amid fears of another war in the Balkans - one that might draw in neighbouring countries - the international community stepped up its monitoring of Kosovo and other potential flashpoints.

But that consistent monitoring has been forced to end - in July the authorities in Belgrade closed down the CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) monitoring mission in Kosovo, Sandak and Vojvodina. Since then, the CSCE has been allowed a one-off visit but cannot re-establish its potentially life-saving base there.

Now Amnesty International, too, has been refused permission to go to Kosovo to investigate human rights violations. "Without any monitors in place, we know that abuses continue unabated," said the organization.

"The police have complete freedom to act as they wish - and that means we get almost daily reports of public beatings, ill-treatment in custody or arrests," said the human rights organization.

In fact, the people of Kosovo are paying for the visits of human rights monitors with more violations. Since the CSCE's departure some of the ethnic Albanians who had contact with them have been arrested and ill-treated. For example, in Prizren, a human rights activist and a member of the ethnic Albanian Democratic League of Kosovo were both detained for more than a week. "They kept asking me: 'What did you tell the CSCE?' and said the CSCE mission was only here to start war and make trouble," one of them said after his release.

Many others, including political activists and former prisoners of conscience, had no direct contact with the mission but have also been arrested since the mission's departure. Typically, they were held for a few hours or days and frequently ill-treated.

"There is a deep-seated pattern of repression of ethnic Albanians by the police," said Amnesty International. "Such is the level of impunity that they feel free to attack citizens in police stations or even on the street, beating and kicking them publicly, with little fear of official reaction. We know of only one case where a policeman is under investigation for such actions."

Amnesty International believes that to prevent further abuse it is essential that long-term international monitors be allowed back into Yugoslavia, and Kosovo in particular, without delay. It is also crucial that the Yugoslav authorities take urgent steps to curb the violations of the police and bring those responsible for the many past abuses to justice.

"Tension is rising," said Amnesty International. "A dangerous mix of ethnic tension, anger and years of silent abuse, made worse by the desperate economic situation, is simmering in Kosovo - the Yugoslav authorities and the international community must act now to stop the situation boiling over into open conflict and more and more human rights abuse."

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