

5 May 2000

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia: increasing pressure on opposition groups

A violent incident involving members of the opposition activist group OTPOR (Resistance) in the town of Požarevac, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), and the authorities' reaction to it mark a disturbing escalation in the pressure exerted on opposition groups on the part of the government, Amnesty International said today.

OTPOR members Dragan Milanović, Momčilo Veljković and Radojko Luković were injured in a fight with alleged members of the ruling coalition parties on 2 May 2000 and are now facing charges of attempted murder. Amnesty International is concerned that the charges may be politically motivated and that they may not receive a fair trial.

The organization is further concerned that the police failed to protect OTPOR members despite having been informed of the threats made against them.

The events leading up to the incident include local OTPOR member Dragan Milanović being approached and threatened on several occasions by a group of men, allegedly members of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) or the Yugoslav Left (JUL), the ruling coalition. The men were also reportedly linked to Marko Milošević, son of FRY President Slobodan Milošević. On the last of these occasions, on Monday 1 May, they ordered Dragan Milanović to meet them the following evening at a café in the town, owned by Marko Milošević, and demanded that he resign from OTPOR and join the SPS.

After reporting the situation to the police and obtaining assurances that there would be a police presence at the café, Dragan Milanović attended the meeting accompanied by other members of OTPOR. During the meeting he was intimidated by four men, said to be employed as private security personnel by Marko Milošević. When two OTPOR members Momčilo Veljković and Radojko Luković attempted to intervene, one of the men allegedly drew a pistol and attacked Momčilo Veljković, striking him on the head with the gun. No police officers were apparently present.

In the ensuing fight, Momčilo Veljković, Radojko Luković and another OTPOR member, lawyer Nebojša Sokolović suffered injuries which required hospital treatment. During the fight Momčilo Veljković grabbed the pistol with which he was being beaten, and attempted to return the blow in self defence.

Mom...ilo Veljkovi*f*, Radojko Lukovi*f* and Neboj*Ó*a Sokolovi*f* were taken to Poñarevac hospital, where they were arrested on a charge of the attempted murder of two members of the JUL party. No charges have reportedly been brought against the other parties to the fight. Radojko Lukovi*f*, who had suffered a fractured skull and other head injuries, remains under police custody in the Belgrade Emergency clinic. The whereabouts of the others, including Neboj*Ó*a Sokolovi*f*, who was taken from the hospital by the police against medical advice, are unknown.

Amnesty International is very concerned that none of the men have been granted access to lawyers, despite the seriousness of the crime of which they are accused, and fears that they are at risk of an unfair trial.

Within an hour of the arrest Ivan Markovi*f*, Federal Minister of Telecommunications and spokesman for JUL, had accused the OTPOR members of a vicious and unprovoked attack and of being "criminals well known to the police for their delinquent behaviour". This statement was also broadcast by the state-controlled television. In other statements OTPOR was described as "fascist" and a "paramilitary organization", and accused of "terrorism".

"The numerous inflammatory statements made by the government representatives indicate that the charges against the three OTPOR members are politically motivated and increase the likelihood that the men will not receive a fair trial," Amnesty International said.

Background

OTPOR was founded by a loose coalition of students and academics in 1998, and has subsequently grown into a significant opposition grouping in Serbia. The organization -- the members of which are mainly students and young people -- remains committed to non-violent acts of protest, and has among its aims the calling of early free elections and repeal of the Law on Public Information. The movement has gained widespread public support within Serbia, but its members have frequently been detained by police for short periods or called for Ainformative talks@, or had posters, badges, and other materials confiscated. In a number of recent incidents members of OTPOR have been physically attacked by unknown persons, or by members of security staff employed in public buildings.

Amnesty International has been increasingly concerned at the growing levels of police harassment and ill-treatment experienced by members of OTPOR and other opposition groups over the last six months.

The independent television station Studio B was prosecuted in connection with its report on the incident. Studio B and its editor, who refused to appear in court, were fined a total of 730,000 dinars (around \$60,000 at the official exchange rate). Independent media have frequently been prosecuted and heavily fined under this law, which Amnesty International considers to violate Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which FRY is a signatory. Studio B is facing further charges in connection with its report.

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