

Public Statement

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### **FRY: Bojan Aleksov and Women in Black - human rights defenders at risk**

Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of human rights defenders and members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Serbia. Amnesty International's concerns have increased following the arrest and ill-treatment of Bojan Aleksov.

Bojan Aleksov is a Serb national who has been living in Budapest for two years, working primarily with the Safe-House project for Conscientious Objectors from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) who have fled to Hungary. He is also closely associated with the Belgrade-based NGO *Zene u Crnom protiv Rata* (Women in Black against War). He was arrested by the State Security Police on 7 July 2000 after he had returned to Belgrade to visit his family. He also returned because of his concern for the Women in Black group. In June this year the State Security and Financial Police interviewed the Women in Black group and members of other NGOs about their financial status, their work and local and international contacts.

Bojan Aleksov was detained from 8pm on 7 July to 7pm on 8 July, after being forcibly removed from his car and taken to the central police station in Belgrade. During this 23-hour period he was repeatedly threatened with death. He was interrogated about his work with the Safe House Project for Conscientious Objectors, the activities of Women in Black and their contacts within the FRY and internationally. It became clear to Bojan Aleksov during his interrogation that the State Security Police had been engaged in the long-term surveillance of Women in Black, and had been recording conversations, including telephone

conversations, which took place in their offices and in their private apartments for at least two years.

During his period of interrogation by the State Security Police, Bojan Aleksov, was repeatedly beaten and subjected to verbal abuse, including homophobic abuse, and other humiliating treatment. For a period of five hours, he was subject to ill-treatment which included being forced to stand on his toes and being beaten with a truncheon on his body. He was denied water for this initial period of five hours, despite a temperature of over 30 degrees. He was kept awake throughout the night, and at 11am the following day he was beaten on the soles of his feet, the palms of his hands and other parts of his body by three police officers, using a baton or truncheon.

Throughout the interrogation, Bojan Aleksov repeatedly stressed to the police that he had not been engaged in espionage, but had been working for human rights in Serbia, particularly in relation to the rights of conscientious objectors. He was finally forced to write a 12-page statement, dictated to him by an interrogating officer, detailing his activities relating to Conscientious Objectors and to the activities of Women in Black, including details of his local and foreign contacts and visits made to other countries. In addition, he was forced to make a shorter statement admitting responsibility for his previous "crimes", and under threat of death, to agree to work for the State Security Service.

He was then forced to repeat parts of the 12-page statement on video camera. He had to admit that he was working for foreign intelligence services, collecting information through Stanislavka (Stasa) Zajovic - who the police described as the leader of Women in Black - and the local network she had created. He had to state that he was then transmitting this information to foreign intelligence services and was

consciously working against the security, integrity and defence capability of the FRY.

He was forced to do the same for his second written statement – having to repeat it three times before the recording was deemed convincing enough. He had to repeat that he would accept "criminal and moral responsibility" for his previous actions and that henceforward he would work for the "service" (State Security Police) – "even at the risk of his own life".

Amnesty International is concerned that these statements made under threat could be used as the basis for charging Bojan Aleksov with "espionage" and the "spreading of false information". Such charges have been used by the FRY authorities in a number of recent cases. Journalist Miroslav Filipovic was sentenced under these charges to seven years imprisonment. Amnesty International was concerned that the charges were used to limit freedom of expression rather than in the legitimate defence of the security of the state.

Bojan Aleksov fled Serbia following his arrest, and now fears for his life. Shortly before and after the arrest, three other members of the group, were interrogated and verbally abused by the State Security Police during "informative talks". The premises of Women in Black in Belgrade and a private apartment where one of the group lived, were raided and searched, and materials including papers and two computer hard-discs were confiscated.

Following these incidents, several members of Women in Black have fled from Belgrade, fearing arrest and prosecution or worse. Given the arrest and ill-treatment of Bojan Aleksov, Amnesty International is extremely concerned for the safety of members of Women in Black who

remain in Serbia and for individuals and members of other NGOs working for human rights in FRY.

Amnesty International calls on the authorities to conduct exhaustive and impartial investigations into the arrest and ill-treatment of Bojan Aleksov; and urges that members of the state security police alleged to be responsible for the ill-treatment of Bojan Aleksov should be immediately suspended from active service until the investigations are completed. Further they should ensure that perpetrators of human rights violations against human rights defenders do not benefit from legal measures exempting them from criminal prosecution or conviction.

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