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Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Kosovo province: Murder and "disappearance" by a police force out of control

The reports of the summary execution of at least eight men in Ljubeniæ and the "disappearance" of another eight in Novi Poklek at the end of May, illustrates an ongoing pattern of grossly excessive use of force by Serbian police in Kosovo province, Amnesty International said today in a new report on the cases.

The report, the fifth in a new series describing Amnesty International's concerns about the human rights crisis in Kosovo province and based on information gathered during a recent visit to the region, describes how large-scale police operations in response to real or alleged attacks on police patrols by armed ethnic Albanians have been characterized by a disproportionate use of force.

"Unarmed civilians, unconnected with any of these attacks, are being injured, killed, or even summarily executed by a police force apparently often out of control," Amnesty International said. "We reiterate our appeals that all Serbian police and Yugoslav Army forces be given strict orders to respect international human rights and humanitarian law," it added.

The report describes how on 25 May, eight men -- aged between 22 and 68 -- were killed after a large police force arrived at Ljubeniæ, a village north of Deèani, after an incident in which a civilian car was shot at by armed men. One or two police or reserve police officers were travelling in the car, which was reportedly being driven by a civilian.

Following the incident, a large number of police officers -- some in armoured vehicles -- arrived at Ljubeniæ, positioned themselves on the outskirts, and started to fire at the Albanian part of the village, using artillery and other weapons for up to 30 minutes. They then started to go from house to house.

In a typical incident, after forcing their way into a house and ordering the occupants out, the police separated the men -- who were reportedly unarmed -- from the women and children, and started to beat them. The men were then ordered to run, and were shot at while they were running. Altogether, four men were killed in this incident, and a further four in other incidents in the village.

Ljubeniæ was attacked again four days later, when police reportedly fired at the village with mortar rounds and other weapons, causing the few villagers who had remained to flee. The village has been deserted ever since.

After fleeing, most of the people of Ljubeniæ moved on through the mountains, crossing the border into Albania or into Montenegro. They appear to have little chance of returning in the immediate future, since some houses were set on fire during the police operation.

The “disappearance” of the eight men from Novi Poklek near Glogovac followed their detention after an incident on 31 May, in which a police officer -- apparently also off duty and in a civilian vehicle -- was involved in a car crash. No other vehicles were involved and it has not been established whether the crash happened because the car was fired at.

That afternoon, a large force of police arrived in several dozen vehicles, and began firing on houses from them. Around half an hour later, police patrols started to go from house to house, again men were separated from women and children, and eight of them remain unaccounted for.

The bodies of two other men were reportedly found at the scene, but it has not yet been possible to establish the circumstances of their death.

“We have heard reports that bodies or body parts have been seen in the village,” Amnesty International said. “There are also allegations that police transported prisoners to a nearby factory where they are being held, or that they have been killed and buried in a mass grave. These may just be rumours, but they highlight the need for action from the authorities to end the agony of the victims’ relatives.”

A group of lawyers from Priština, who have been given power of attorney by relatives of the missing men, wrote to the Serbian and Federal judicial authorities claiming that nine men -- aged between 15 and 60 -- had been killed, and asking for an investigation into the incident, for the bodies to be located, an autopsy to be performed on them, and for the bodies to be handed over to the relatives for burial.

Their letter has been acknowledged by the district court, but no other replies had been received from the authorities by the end of June.

“The Serbian authorities should order prompt and impartial investigations into the incidents described in our report, take immediate steps to determine the fate and whereabouts of the eight men reportedly “disappeared”, and bring any police officers responsible for excessive use of force, unlawful killings or “disappearances” promptly to justice,” Amnesty International urged.

For further information, to request copies of the latest and previous reports, or to arrange an interview, please phone Soraya Bermejo, Press Officer, on +44 171 413 5562

Recent reports on Kosovo, “Series A”:

- Background: A crisis waiting to happen
- Violence in Drenica
- Deaths in custody, torture and ill-treatment
- Unfair trials and abuses of due process
- Ljubenja and Poklek: Extrajudicial executions, excessive use of force and “disappearances” (the subject of this press release)

“Series B” will be published in the coming weeks.