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Kosovo: Civilians rounded up and murdered by Serbian forces, witnesses tell Amnesty International delegates

“The women were ordered to depart with the elderly and children... the men were lined up in two rows, and told to turn their backs. The soldiers then opened fire on the group with automatic weapons. Bodies fell on top of me and I was able to feign death until the soldiers left.”

This is the testimony of a man describing how he survived the execution of a large group of elderly men at Izbica in the Drenica region of Kosovo province. Amnesty International delegates, in cooperation with members of the Albanian Human Rights Group, have gathered dozens of testimonies from refugees from that area.

“What is clear from these testimonies is that our fears that civilians of the Drenica region were murdered by Serbian security forces between 25 and 28 March, are not unfounded,” Amnesty International delegates reported.

By 15 March 1999, the area held thousands of villagers and many ethnic Albanians displaced from other villages in Kosovo. A Serbian offensive against the region began on 25 March 1999 which took control of Banja and moved towards Kladernica, which they surrounded and captured on 27 March.

In another testimony, a member of the Osmani family from Kladernica recalls that Serbian forces ordered the family to form a line, with their hands clasped behind their heads. Four men were separated from the rest of the group. A female family member begged for mercy, handing over 400 Deutschmarks. But the men were shot dead in front of the rest of their family, including small children.

After Serb forces withdrew from the area on or around 31 March, ethnic Albanians were again able to emerge from hiding. With the help of KLA soldiers they managed to locate, identify and bury the bodies in Kladernica, Izbica and other villages in the region.

The largest of these graves appears to be in a field in Izbica village. The burial of the victims was recorded on a videotape smuggled out of Kosovo into Albania. An aerial photo of the grave site was released by NATO on 17 April and according to KLA, it contains 151 bodies. Some of these were KLA combatants.

Amnesty International believes that some of these bodies are of civilian who were killed by Serbian security forces or indiscriminately killed during shelling.

Other bodies were found and buried in other places, for example in the hills surrounding Kladernica village or in Kastriot village.

Amnesty International cannot confirm the manner in which these people died. The organization's researchers in the field are continuing to collect information from first-hand witnesses who come from Izbica, Kladernica and surrounding villages.

For further information or to arrange an interview, please call the Press Office of Amnesty International: +44 171 413 5566