

News Service 204/98

AI INDEX: EUR 70/79/98  
20 OCTOBER 1998

## **PUBLIC STATEMENT**

### **FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF YUGOSLAVIA (FRY)**

#### **Bans in Serbia hinder unbiased reporting of human rights abuses**

Amnesty International is today expressing dismay as the Serbian authorities continue to silence independent media which have made a point of reporting human rights abuses perpetrated by all sides in the country, particularly those in the Kosovo province.

On 16 October officials from the Serbian Ministry of Information and police sealed the premises of the independent daily newspaper *Naša Borba* and prevented it from publishing until further notice. The Serbian Parliament has today passed a new Law on Public Information which is reported to include similar restrictions to those in the recent decree which is being used to close down newspapers.

Last week the independent dailies *Dnevni Telegraph* and *Danas* were also closed in a similar fashion to *Naša Borba*. The closures are officially justified on the basis of the Serbian government decree passed on 8 October when the threatened air-strikes by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) became imminent. The newspapers in question were accused by the Serbian Ministry of Information of “spread[ing] fear, panic and defeatism.”

Veiled threats have been made that the Albanian-language media in Kosovo province may also be banned under the government decree. The same decree banned the retransmission by domestic radio stations of programmes from foreign broadcasters such as the Serbian-language services of the BBC, Voice of America, *Deutsche Welle* and others.

In recent months, that is before the decree, a number of independent radio stations have been closed down. These included *Radio Kontakt* in Priština, Kosovo province, which attempted to establish the only independent, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual broadcasts in the province. Representatives of the independent media have repeatedly complained about unreasonable restrictions on the allocation of licences and frequencies which have been used as the pretext for these closures.

Amnesty International is concerned that these measures are part of a widespread pattern of restrictions and abuses against journalists critical of the government and activists in non-governmental organizations working in Serbia. Ethnic Albanian journalists and human rights activists in Kosovo have been beaten and detained by police and others.

Journalists working in the official media are also vulnerable to human rights abuses. This weekend two Serb journalists working for an official news agency were reported to be missing among fears that they may have been abducted by armed ethnic Albanians. Two other Serbian journalists have been missing since 21 August.

Amnesty International also believes that the gathering of information about human rights abuses and reporting on them -- carried out by the independent media in so many countries -- is fundamental to the protection and promotion of human rights and appeals to all parties to the conflict in the Kosovo province to protect journalists and human rights activists from human rights abuses.

The organization also calls on the FRY authorities not to impose any restrictions on freedom of expression beyond those which are justified under international standards, including Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) is a party.

### **Background information**

Many commentators believe that the biased reporting by the state-controlled media in Serbia has contributed to an atmosphere of extreme nationalism where the concept of the human rights of other nationalities or ethnic groups is at best ignored.

On 2 October Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Vojislav Šešelj was reported as stating that foreign and local journalists "who serve foreign powers" would not be protected under the Geneva Conventions if NATO air strikes took place against Yugoslavia. He had accused Serbian non-governmental organizations of being a fifth column. Three days later, an ethnic Albanian camera operator working for the American agency, APTV, was reportedly beaten by police. Television pictures of dead ethnic Albanians, allegedly massacred by police in the village of Gornje Obrinje, which he had taken were broadcast around the world a few days before. Some media outlets and non-governmental organizations report having received anonymous threatening telephone calls in recent days.

On 8 October, the Serbian government passed a "Decree on Special Measures in the Circumstances of NATO's Threats of Military Attacks against our Country". Among other things the decree specified that media outlets "shall not disseminate defeatism and act contrary to the conclusions of the Federal Assembly and the People's Assembly of the Republic of Serbia..." The following day the government threatened that special taxes would be imposed on the use of satellite dishes and the Internet.

On 19 October the official news agency *Tanjug* reported that its journalists Nebojša Radošević and Vladimir Dobrić had gone missing on 18 October near the village of Magura in the Kosovo province. Police feared that they had been captured by the ethnic Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Journalist Djuro Perinić and driver Djuro Slavuj from the official Radio Priština station went missing on 21 August in similar circumstances and have never been seen since. ENDS.../



Press contacts: **Brendan Paddy/ Susan Kobrin**; Tel. 0171 814  
6238/6239/6240; out of hours: 0421 398984; Internet:  
<http://www.amnesty.org.uk>; E-mail: [press@amnesty.org.uk](mailto:press@amnesty.org.uk); ISDN available