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ALBANIA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CONCERNED ABOUT ALLEGED VIOLATION OF RIGHT TO FAIR TRIAL

Amnesty International is concerned about the Albanian authorities' investigation proceedings in the case of five members of a Greek minority organization due to be tried in Albania next week.

The five men, all arrested in April this year, are members of "Omonia" -- an organization representing the Greek minority in Albania. According to reports none of them were allowed contact with their families throughout investigation proceedings, and four of the defendants did not have lawyers throughout most, or all, of the investigation, but there are conflicting accounts of the reasons for this.

The fifth defendant, Theodoros Vezianis, who holds dual Albanian and American citizenship, reportedly engaged a lawyer who has been present during investigation proceedings.

The five defendants have all been charged with treason and three of them have also been charged with illegal possession of arms. Under the Albanian Criminal Code, treason is an offence punishable by 10 to 25 years' imprisonment or the death penalty.

Amnesty International wrote to the Procurator General in June requesting details of the charges against the men, but the organization still has not received any response to this request.

However, Amnesty International has since learned that the five men are accused of having had contacts with Greek intelligence agents and various organizations in Greece, with the aim of changing Albania's borders and incorporating areas of southern Albania into Greece.

Amnesty International has also recently received allegations that the five were severely ill-treated following arrest. These complaints were not made to the High Commissioner on National Minorities of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) when he visited the defendants in June, allegedly for fear of further ill-treatment.

The human rights organization intends to send a delegate to Albania next month to investigate these possible issues of concern and to obtain information about other matters within its mandate.

"We are following this case closely and we are calling on the Albanian authorities to ensure that the five defendants are given a fair and open trial", Amnesty International said.

In its June letter to the Procurator General, the organization also expressed its concern about allegations that, following the arrest of the five defendants, other members of the Greek minority had been threatened by police during questioning about the defendants and a number of "Omonia" offices had been searched by police without warrant. Amnesty International has not yet received any response from the authorities about this matter.

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