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EXTERNAL



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Federal Republic of Yugoslavia OTPOR: Students & academics in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Amnesty International's concerns:

Amnesty International is concerned at reported incidents of ill-treatment by the police of members of *Otpor (Resistance)*, a loose coalition of groups of students opposed to the Serbian government.

Otpor activists have also been repeatedly arrested and questioned by police, the legal basis for their arrest has not always been clear and it appears that the arrests may be an attempt to harass them. Between September 1999 and January 2000 there were over 100 arrests of *Otpor* activists. Several of them, especially those identified as coordinators, have been arrested on several occasions. Most have been released without charge after interviews. *Otpor* activists and their associates have also had their property searched, and materials related to *Otpor* have been seized by the police.

During demonstrations in Belgrade on 9 November 1999 *Otpor* activists, other students and members of the public were beaten by the police. They have also received inadequate protection by police officers on occasions when they have been attacked by people in civilian clothing while attempting to distribute leaflets. *Otpor* activists suspect that these civilians have included plainclothes police officers.

Otpor has been singled out for verbal attacks by the authorities, including by Mirjana Marković (wife of President Slobodan Milošević), of the Yugoslav United Left party, part of the governing coalition. Given recent statements from *Otpor* activists that they want to step up their activities, Amnesty International fears *Otpor* activists will be at increased risk of ill-treatment by the police.

All this is happening in a situation of increasing restrictions on freedom of speech in Serbia. *Otpor*, along with opposition political parties, the independent media and civil society actors have stood out against the 1998 Law on Public Information which has been used to level heavy fines or short prison sentences not only on members of the independent media, but also on others who have criticized the regime. Amnesty International considers this law to violate Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees the right to freedom of expression.

Background:

Students have been frequently involved in protest movements in FRY, and took a key role in leading the massive anti-government protests which lasted over 80 days during the winter of 1996-1997. Although the main focus of *Zajedno* (Together) - the coalition of opposition parties which led the protests – was initially to protest against the refusal of the government to implement the results of the local elections in Serbia, in which the opposition parties won a victory, the protests broadened to include a whole range of other issues. Students also raised issues relating to the situation in the universities, focussing on the removal of the rector of the University of Belgrade.

After some initial violence, these protests became non-violent in their nature, with an inventive and creative spirit – ranging from whistle blowing to days with different themes (walking backwards, for instance) – which enabled thousands of people to continue demonstrating for such a long period of time. Hundreds of demonstrators were arrested, for example, for throwing cartons of yogurt and eggs at government buildings or carrying effigies of President Milošević. In the first 10 days of December 1996, between 30 and 50 demonstrators were arrested, 12 of whom were charged and sentenced to 25 days' imprisonment for disturbing the public peace.

Otpor was founded in October 1998. The movement is a loose coalition of student groups, based in both the capital, Belgrade, and in other larger provincial cities and towns. *Otpor* activities are either coordinated between the groups, or take the form of individual initiatives organized in the regions.

Otpor was originally founded in response to a law passed in May 1998 which gave the Serbian government direct control over the universities, allowing them to appoint the rector and deans of the University of Belgrade. Teaching staff were asked to sign a new contract which they claimed was an "oath of loyalty". Over 150 staff members have refused to sign, and over 100 have been dismissed from or have left their posts. Students from the University of Belgrade set up *Otpor* to oppose the restrictions on the University's independence, and protested in a variety of different ways, including marches and boycotts of lectures. Since around November 1998, the focus of their activities has taken a wider focus, and a more anti-government stance.

Srdja Popović, one of the *Otpor* activists writes: "The idea of OTPOR is exclusively bound to non-violent methods of offering resistance to all types of repression and the violation of human rights ... The only violence we are unfortunately connected with is police violence against our activists. Our actions are always agreed in advance, and apart from the use of provocative symbols never include use of unlawful methods. This is the general politics of OTPOR, and up till now no-one has departed from them, neither will they, as above all because of the fact that the Serbian regime simply longs for violent acts by the democratic forces so as to justify its own violent acts. The founding idea of OTPOR is that the building of a new political generation in Serbia be carried out... peacefully, bravely, persistently and in a civilized manner.'