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ALBANIA: AMNESTY CALLS ON PRESIDENT BELISHA TO RELEASE NINE
PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE TO MARK NATIONAL DAY

President Belisha should demonstrate Albania's determination to honour its human rights commitments by releasing nine prisoners of conscience to mark next week's National Day, Amnesty International said today.

"By releasing these men, Albania would be making a break with the past when, under communist rule, thousands of people were imprisoned or otherwise persecuted simply because they were opponents or presumed opponents of the government," the organization said.

Amnesty International is concerned that their continued detention casts a shadow over Albania's recent ratification in October this year of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees among other rights, the right to express one's opinion freely and the right to associate without restrictions.

In a report issued in November the organization details the cases of nine prisoners of conscience currently held in detention. They include Fatos Nano, leader of the Socialist Party, who was arrested in July 1993 and convicted in April 1994 on charges of "embezzlement to the benefit of third persons" in connection with the delivery of emergency aid from Italy in 1991 and "falsification of official documents". This was during his period as Prime Minister in the communist government of former President Ramiz Alia.

Another prisoner of conscience whose case is documented in the report is Idajet Beqiri, leader of the (opposition) National Unity Party, who in September this year was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment on charges of "crimes against humanity", allegedly committed in 1985 under communist rule.

The organization has studied their cases and concluded that they were denied a fair trial. The charges against them were not substantiated by the evidence presented in court and appeared to be politically motivated.

"The detention of the two men was instrumental in preventing them from taking an active part in national elections in May this year," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International is calling also for the release of seven men convicted in three separate trials in 1996 on charges of "anti-constitutional" activity for attempting to "recreate" a banned Communist Party or for disseminating Marxist writings. They are serving sentences ranging from 10 months' to four years' imprisonment, although no evidence was produced in court to show that they had used or advocated violence.

Amnesty International acknowledges that the severe repression and human rights violations perpetrated in Albania during the years of communist rule have ensured that many Albanian citizens are opposed to the recreation of a communist party or the promotion of Marxist ideas. However, a commitment to the protection of citizens' human rights requires, on the part of the authorities, an acceptance of pluralism which grants all citizens, regardless of their views, basic human rights, including the right to express their opinions.

In calling for the release of the nine men, the organization was expressing neither support for, nor rejection of, their individual views; it simply asked for their basic human rights to be respected.

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