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## **PUBLIC STATEMENT**

### **FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF YUGOSLAVIA HOSTAGE TAKING IN KOSOVO CONTRIBUTES TO ESCALATING VIOLENCE**

The taking of eight Yugoslav Army soldiers as hostages by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) on 8 January contravenes fundamental principles of humanitarian law as reflected in the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their protocols for parties in armed conflicts, Amnesty International said today.

The eight soldiers were detained by armed ethnic Albanian members of the KLA in a confrontation near Stari Trg in the north of Kosovo. A KLA representative said yesterday that they would be released only in exchange for nine KLA members detained in a clash with the Yugoslav Army on the Albanian border on 14 December. The Yugoslav authorities have threatened to use force to free the soldiers.

While international humanitarian law permits the taking of prisoners, it expressly forbids -- as in common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions -- the taking of hostages. Amnesty International condemns the KLA's imposition of conditions on the release of these men as it believes that there can be no prospect of a resolution of the Kosovo crisis until all parties involved fully respect international human rights and humanitarian law.

The organization has repeatedly condemned human rights abuses -- including extrajudicial executions, "disappearances", torture, ill-treatment and forcible displacement -- committed by the security forces in Kosovo, as well as unlawful killings and abductions by the KLA or armed ethnic Albanians

#### **Background**

At least 1,000 ethnic Albanians have been detained by the Serbian authorities in the last year. Amnesty International has evidence that many of them have been tortured or ill-treated in custody. As many as five may have died in 1998 as a result of the injuries sustained during brutal interrogations. Trials Amnesty International considers unfair are proceeding against these people even though there is no solid evidence to support the charges against them. Judicial procedures have been abused. Hundreds of ethnic Albanians are unaccounted for, many of whom were detained by the police before their "disappearance".

The nine KLA members demanded in exchange for the soldiers are among these detainees. One of them is a 17-year-old female pre-university medical student. Amnesty International has written to the Yugoslav authorities asking the reasons for her detention and assurances about her treatment, particularly on account of her status as a minor. No reply has been received so far.

More than one hundred people, predominantly Serbs and Montenegrins, are unaccounted for from areas which were under KLA control, yet the KLA has rarely admitted to detaining prisoners except in high profile cases such as this. Even though it is feared that many of the "missing" are dead, the KLA has not provided information -- which it undoubtedly has -- about the fate of many of them.

Tension has been steadily rising in Kosovo despite a cease fire introduced in October which markedly reduced violence. An international "Verification Mission" deployed by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has acknowledged monitoring respect for human rights as part of its mission. However, the mission's deployment and activation is proceeding slowly.

Besides armed clashes between the security forces and KLA in the countryside there are increasing incidents of violence in the towns. For example, on 5 January a bomb was thrown at the Cool café in Priština, frequented exclusively by Serbs. Customers may have narrowly escaped death as the bomb failed to penetrate the glass. Some were injured by flying glass. Albanian-owned cafés in the vicinity were then smashed up by Serb civilians outraged by the attack. The police present allegedly failed to prevent them from doing so.

There have been other recent reports of Serb civilians, some of them armed, taking their own initiatives in response to attacks on Serbs although police have intervened in some of the cases.

On 11 January Enver Maloku, editor-in-chief of the Kosovo Information Centre, an ethnic Albanian news agency close to the Democratic League of Kosovo, the largest ethnic Albanian party, was shot by his home in Priština by unknown persons. No one has so far claimed responsibility for either attack.

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