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Kosovo: Amnesty International calls for the government to respect and ensure the right to freedom of expression

Amnesty International is concerned at the Kosovo government's failure to denounce threats on the life of journalist Jeta Xharra, managing editor of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) in Kosovo, and to take steps to ensure her protection against these threats.

The threats against Jeta Xharra were made following a broadcast of the weekly programme "Life in Kosovo" (Jeta në Kosovë) on Radio Television Kosova (RTK) on 28 May 2009, which focussed on the question of freedom of expression in Kosovo.

The programme included a debate between government officials, journalists and representatives of non-governmental organizations and covered reports by international organizations including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Freedom House and the US State Department which have all recently reported concerns about the freedom of the media in Kosovo.

The 28 May episode of "Life in Kosovo" also included a video report on the failure of municipal officials in the Skenderaj municipality to deliver on election promises, and which illustrated the lack of freedom of speech in that municipality. The report showed that local residents were reluctant, and in some cases frightened, to speak out against local officials. The video concluded with the BIRN Kosovo TV crew being prevented from filming outside the Skenderaj Cultural Centre, reportedly by an unidentified armed man. The crew who then called the police, filmed themselves leaving Skenderaj with a police escort.

The BIRN office subsequently received emailed threats including "If we catch you there again in Skenderaj, we will beat the hell out of you". Threats were also made against the lives of some of those interviewed during the video report, including, "Don't be surprised if someone kills your source". Media coverage of the broadcast, including in the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK)-funded paper *Infopress*, has accused Jeta Xharra of being a "Serbian spy", suggested that the programme was "cooked up in kitchens in Belgrade", and in an opinion piece published by "Infopress", the author chillingly remarked that "Jeta has brought it upon herself to have a short life".

Further articles have challenged Jeta Xharra's professional and moral fitness to run the programme, and suggested that "Life in Kosovo" be removed from the RTK schedule.

The attacks on the work of BIRN which followed the programme have been condemned by the EU's International Civilian Office, the OSCE Chief of Mission, as well as local and international non-governmental organizations.

Amnesty International strongly regrets that the Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi, leader of the PDK and President Fatmir Sejdiu have failed to denounce the threats made towards a journalist from an independent media outlet and others who were exercising their right to freedom of expression. The organization calls on them to denounce the recent threats against BIRN Kosovo, to publicly dissociate themselves from the statements made in *Infopress*, and to underline their commitment to ensuring the right to freedom of expression, including the right to freedom of information. Amnesty International also calls on the Ministry of Interior to take

steps to ensure that effective protection by law enforcement bodies is available for Jeta Xharra and others against whom threats were made.

The right to freedom of expression, which includes the right to receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, is set out in international human rights standards applicable in Kosovo, including Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. The right is also set out in the Constitution of Kosovo, which in Article 40 states, "Freedom of expression is guaranteed. Freedom of expression includes the right to express oneself, to disseminate and receive information, opinions and other messages without impediment." The role of the media in facilitating the free flow of information and ideas is key to ensuring in practice the right of everyone to freedom of expression and information. In particular, the media can play a crucial part in reporting on human rights violations.

Background

"Infopress" has also published attacks on BIRN for a web-based report published in April 2009, which covered the alleged involvement of the Kosova Liberation Army (KLA) after the end of the armed conflict in the abduction of Serbs and their transfer to the "Yellow House" in Albania, where it is alleged they were subsequently killed.

In a report published on 8 June 2009 - *"Burying the Past": impunity for enforced disappearances and abductions in Kosovo* - Amnesty International called on leading politicians in Kosovo to end the culture of impunity, including the culture of silence and denial (reported on by BIRN) around alleged war crimes, including abductions by the KLA. BIRN's web-based reports and the programme, "Life in Kosovo", are among the few public media to have openly discussed these issues.

BIRN is a network of seven media development organizations based in Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Romania and Bulgaria, with regional BIRN Hub, based in Sarajevo. It was developed from the Institute of War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) and has focussed on the publication of independent reporting and the promotion of investigative journalism.

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