

AI INDEX: EUR 70/09/98
26 February 1998

PUBLIC STATEMENT

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Five years on : still no justice for victims of Štrpci abductions

Five years since the abduction and killing of 19 men -- all but one of them Muslim citizens of Montenegro and Serbia -- and still the perpetrators have not been brought to justice nor have the relatives received compensation from the authorities involved, according to Amnesty International today.

The men had been abducted by Bosnian Serb and Serbian paramilitaries on 27 February 1993 from a train travelling from Belgrade to Bar (Montenegro) as it crossed briefly into Serbian-held Bosnian territory, at Štrpci station. They had "disappeared" for more than three years until finally, in June 1996, it became publicly known that on the day the men were abducted, they were taken to a village near Višegrad where they were shot and their bodies thrown in the Drina river.

Amnesty International is calling upon the newly inaugurated Presidents of Montenegro and Serbia, and also on the newly appointed Bosnian Serb authorities, to finally end the impunity with which this gross human rights violation was committed by bringing those responsible to justice.

The human rights organization wants to remind in particular the Federal Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević to live up to his obligations towards his citizens. At the time of the abduction Slobodan Milošević was President of the Republic of Serbia and in this capacity he repeatedly assured the relatives of the abducted men that he would do everything in his power to ensure that justice was done. In March 1993, he personally assured relatives of the abducted : "We are not going to allow those people who are committing serious crimes to walk freely in these regions".

In fact, this is exactly what has happened since. The authorities' attempts to clarify the fate of their citizens have been grossly inadequate, inconsistent and at times deliberately counter-productive. A small Montenegrin Parliamentary Commission which had been entrusted with collecting information on the case in early 1993, complained on several occasions that federal Yugoslav, Serbian and Montenegrin officials had not answered its requests for information about this matter and had not given the Commission, which had no executive powers, the assistance it needed. In particular the Commission raised the failure of the authorities to question crucial witnesses.

Furthermore in November 1995, the Montenegrin Parliament rejected a request by the Commission to expand its powers so that it would have the authority to force state officials to hand over all available documentation on this case.

A testimony given by a key witness -- himself a former member of the paramilitary unit involved in the abduction, who had seen members of his unit shoot people and throw their bodies into the Drina river -- led to the arrest of a Serbian man in October 1996. This man was also a member of the same paramilitary unit and is subsequently reported to have confessed to taking part in the abduction and shooting. To date, this man has not been brought to trial. Instead, a lengthy argument about whether it should be a Serbian or a Montenegrin court which has the jurisdiction to try him has taken place.

The reported leader of the paramilitary unit -- a Bosnian Serb who operated on Serb-held territory in Bosnia-Herzegovina but crossed frequently into Serbian and Montenegrin territory-- was heavily implicated in the abduction and the killings by witness testimonies. Although he was arrested on several occasions in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on suspicion of having committed this crime and others, he was always released and eventually extradited to the Republika Srpska (the Bosnian Serb entity) in June 1994. To Amnesty International's knowledge, no steps have been taken to hold him to account for his role in the abduction and killings by the prosecuting authorities in the Republika Srpska.
ENDS.../