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Federal Republic of Yugoslavia: Today in Kosovo province, exceptional suffering is typical suffering

As news breaks daily of more civilian communities in western Kosovo coming under fire, we already know the horrors that those people can expect to experience, so established are the patterns of violence and abuse, Amnesty International said today as it issued new reports on Kosovo.

"Exceptional suffering has become unexceptional," Amnesty International said. "Each day extreme misery and pain produced by human cruelty is now an everyday experience for more and more helpless people."

The three new reports launched by the organization on Kosovo's human rights crisis include two reports highlighting specific aspects of the tragedy: the plight of women victims, and people "disappeared" or gone "missing".

"In areas of civil turmoil and conflict, women are particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses. Kosovo has proved this again," Amnesty International said.

Xhemile Tahiraj, for example, had left her home village in April to find safety for herself and her five-year-old daughter with relatives in the town of Djakovica. Within days, hearing that her husband - who allegedly had links to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) - was dead, she made her way home, but the village came under allegedly indiscriminate Serbian police shell and sniper fire. She was shot in the leg, and her daughter was also injured.

The report highlights the particular vulnerability of women and children who are refugees or internally displaced. It also features cases of human rights abuse of women away from the fighting, including police ill-treatment of the kind seen for years in Kosovo, and unfair trials.

"The 'disappeared' and 'missing' are the hidden victims of Kosovo," Amnesty International said. "Our new report on this aspect of the conflict shows how all ethnic groups are affected: ethnic Albanians have "disappeared" in Serbian police hands; Serbs, Albanians and Roma are "missing" after abduction by the KLA."

The "disappeared" include Jakup Qerimi, a 27-year-old ethnic Albanian who is mentally retarded. Police detained him in the town of Uroševac on 20 June. When his mother sought information about him, police told her he was a KLA member. They told her she would never see her son again; so far they have been right.

Among the recently "missing" is Djordje Djoric, a 28-year-old Serb. On 17 July he was stopped near Orahovac by the KLA while driving a pregnant neighbour to hospital. Reportedly the KLA men held him in detention at the hospital and beat him because his brothers are police officers. There has been no further news of him.

The third report released by the organization focuses on events at Orahovac, a town fought over by the KLA and Serbian forces in July and the scene of numerous reported human rights abuses.

"Orahovac is chillingly remarkable not least because in that one place -- and in the space of just five days -- almost all the dimensions of Kosovo's human rights tragedy were played out," Amnesty International said. "Events at Orahovac and at nearby Mališevo also point to what other communities have been going through right up to today. The latest reports from western Kosovo speak of the same kind of deliberate and arbitrary violence against civilians, the same terror and mass displacement of people."

At Orahovac between 17 and 21 July, as the Serbian police and Yugoslav military battled the KLA for control of the town, Albanian civilians were reportedly deliberately and arbitrarily killed, including in the street as they tried to escape from the fighting. Houses were shelled indiscriminately - some were allegedly deliberately torched - and their terrified inhabitants compelled to flee. The KLA abducted Serb civilians who are now "missing" and are feared killed. In the immediate aftermath scores of Albanians were detained by police and are feared to have been tortured or ill-treated.

For those civilians who fled from Orahovac -- estimated at some 15,000 people, three quarters of the town's population -- their plight became all too typical of what the internally displaced of Kosovo experience. Many headed towards the nearby town of Mališevo, but police advances only days later forced them to flee again in panic into the woods and hills. For days they were beyond the reach of humanitarian agencies.

To their number have now been added tens of thousands fleeing a new Serbian offensive which intensified during August in the region around Pe_.

Amnesty International is highlighting the many unanswered questions from Orahovac, including the need to investigate possible extrajudicial executions and other deliberate and arbitrary acts by police and military forces, the uncertain death toll, the fate of the "missing", and the treatment of the more than 300 people taken into detention in the aftermath by police - among them more than 50 believed still detained and now facing criminal charges.

Orahovac was the first - to date the only - attempt by the KLA to seize control of a major population centre. Their expulsion from the town appears to have marked a crucial change in their military fortunes: within days the KLA had also fled its "headquarters" nearby at Mališevo.

"As the security operation has moved westwards, closer to Pe_ and Djakovica, the available evidence is of repeating patterns of violence against civilian communities," Amnesty International noted.

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