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5 March 1994

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA: BOSNIAN SERB FORCES RESPONSIBLE FOR NEW ABUSES AGAINST MINORITIES

Newly arriving Muslim and Croat refugees from Serb-controlled areas of northwest Bosnia say Bosnian Serb forces committed or condoned armed attacks, deliberate and arbitrary killings, torture, ill-treatment, rape and sexual abuse to force them to seek to leave, Amnesty International said today.

"Statements taken from fleeing refugees document a situation in which the de facto Bosnian Serb authorities turn a blind eye to the human rights abuses that are being committed in the towns and villages that refugees have been forced to leave behind", Amnesty International said today.

Amnesty International has been collecting testimony in the past few days from the latest Muslim and Croat refugees arriving in Croatia from Banja Luka and other towns controlled by Bosnian Serb forces. Most refugees are concerned for relatives and friends remaining there and wish to protect them, therefore Amnesty International is releasing only limited details about the allegations of human rights abuses.

Although it is impossible to quantify the full extent of those human rights abuses, it is clear that they are widespread and that there is a genuine cause for concern for the safety of the remaining minorities. And the situation apparently worsens each day, the human rights group said.

Most human rights abuses in northwest Bosnia can be associated with the eviction of people from their homes or attempts to force them to seek to leave. Amnesty International has received disturbing evidence of the complicity of the Bosnian Serb authorities in encouraging the eviction of Muslims or Croats in favour of Serbs, usually those displaced by the war from other parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

"Many refugees reported that those who threatened them had clearly obtained details of their circumstances and family, implying that authorities in the Serb-controlled areas of northwest Bosnia had provided the information," Amnesty International said.

In Banja Luka in particular, refugees reported receiving letters notifying them of their eviction or new prospective occupants arrived with such letters, according to Amnesty International. Confrontations over the houses then occurred on their doorsteps or inside, with Serbs claiming to have been given the flat or house. Those who came claiming the houses were often wearing military uniforms and carrying arms. Where violence was not used immediately in such confrontations or in cases where letters were received, the eviction message was frequently underlined by gunshots and even grenades fired at houses, threats and intimidation on the streets and telephone threats.

In many cases, when individuals reported incidents to the civil or military police, these authorities failed to take proper action, the refugees told Amnesty International. Most of the incidents occurred after dark, but the police did not come until the following day, even in some cases when they were alerted while the perpetrators were still present. When police did arrive, they only carried out superficial investigations, according to refugees' testimony. Some victims were given reassurances from the police, yet when the victims pleaded for adequate protection, the answers were little different from that given to one victim: "It would be better for you to go for your own safety, we cannot protect you."

Many of the attacks against individuals in houses involved robbery by uniformed men who frequently used violence, including rape or sexual abuse. Even where robbery appeared to be the prime motive, the circumstances of many incidents link them to the general pattern of using violence or threats to force minorities to leave and cede their property to individual Serbs or to authorities to give to others.

Some victims said they were grateful for the intervention of Bosnian Serbian friends and neighbours. In at least one incident, a Bosnian Serb neighbour's intervention apparently saved the victim's life. Another refugee alleged that Bosnian Serbs who intervened to help her were subsequently threatened and attacked themselves, Amnesty International said. In some towns, the pressure to displace Muslims or Croats appears to come not from displaced Serbs but mainly from Serbs in outlying areas who wish to move into the towns, Amnesty International was told.

Amnesty International repeated its call for the Bosnian Serb authorities to take urgent and effective action to protect the remaining minorities in all the areas they control. Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of these individuals, not only in the larger towns in northwest Bosnia, such as Banja Luka and Prijedor, but also in the smaller towns and villages in east Bosnia where minorities have less opportunity to tell the outside world about the human rights violations they have suffered.

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