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EXTERNAL



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Rexhep Bislimi: Death following alleged ill-treatment in custody

Rexhep Bislimi, an ethnic Albanian from the town of Uroševac (Ferizaj in Albanian) in Kosovo province, died on 21 July 1998, at the age of 32, in a hospital in Priština, the province capital. He had been brought there on 19 July from police custody in Priština. The available information strongly suggests that he died as a result of injuries inflicted upon him while in police custody.

Rexhep Bislimi was a former prisoner of conscience adopted by Amnesty International. As a 22-year-old student at a Technical college, he was arrested in December 1988; in July 1989 he was convicted of “hostile propaganda” and sentenced to two year’s imprisonment by the district court of Priština. Together with five other defendants he was found guilty of reading Albanian nationalist tracts advocating Kosovo’s secession and of giving these texts to other persons to read.

Recently Rexhep Bislimi has worked as a human rights activist for the Uroševac branch of the Priština-based Council for the Defence of Human Rights and Freedoms, which - via a network of local activists - has since the early 1990's compiled records of human rights violations against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and publicized them.

With the outbreak of armed conflict in Kosovo in March 1998 the authorities began to carry out mass arrests of ethnic Albanians suspected of being members or supporters of the secessionist Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). On 6 July 1998 three plain-clothes police officers arrested Rexhep Bislimi at his home. The next day some 20 police officers reportedly brought him back to his home and tried to force him to dig up some weapons which they suspected he had buried in his front garden. According to his family, he was too weak from beatings to carry out their orders and neighbours were called in to help. No weapons were found and the police took him back to the police station. Later he was transferred to a prison in Priština. His family and a lawyer were apparently not allowed to visit him. On 19 July he was taken by police to the intensive care unit of Priština hospital, where he was kept under armed guard. It is alleged that he

was heavily bruised, had several broken ribs and was suffering from internal bleeding. He died three days later in the Surgical Ward of the hospital; according to one report he had undergone a kidney operation. His death certificate reportedly states that blows to the head and body caused his death (Amnesty International has not seen a copy of this certificate).

Amnesty International's concern

Amnesty International is concerned that Rexhep Bislimi may have died as a result of ill-treatment in custody. The organization calls on the Yugoslav authorities to investigate promptly, thoroughly and impartially the circumstances surrounding his arrest, detention and death. The organization calls on the authorities to bring to justice any police or state security officer or prison warden found responsible for having tortured or ill-treated him prior to his death. The organization further calls upon the authorities to grant fair and adequate compensation to his family if it is established that he was tortured or ill-treated prior to his death.

Amnesty International also calls on the FRY authorities to:

- institute safeguards to prevent torture and ill-treatment of all detainees;
- grant all detainees full legal safeguards including unrestricted access to their lawyers;
- to hold prisoners only in publicly recognized places of detention;
- to make available without delay accurate information about their arrest and detention to courts, families and lawyers;
- and ensure that all places of detention are regularly inspected by an independent body, such as the ICRC, able to visit unannounced and with unrestricted access.

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