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"Missing": 16 passengers from Sjeverin (Mioče)

Mujo Alihodžić, Mustafa Bajramović, Ramiz Begović, Ramahudin Ćatović, Esad Džihić, Idriz Gibović, Muzafer Hadžić, Medo Hadžić, Medredin Hodžić, Mevlida Koldžić (nee Hodžić), Alija Mandal, Sead Pecikoza, Hajrudin Sajtarević, Mehmed Šebo, Mithad Softić, Derviš Softić and possibly Sabahudin Ćatović _

Amnesty International is concerned about the fate of 15 "missing" men and one woman from Sjeverin village, in the Sandžak region of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, who were last seen in the custody of uniformed men suspected of serving with the *de facto* Bosnian Serb Army. The organization is further concerned about the whereabouts of another man who went "missing" the night before and who may have been similarly abducted.

In the early morning hours of 22 October 1992, a bus carrying workers from the village of Sjeverin in the Sandžak region to their workplace in the town of Priboj was stopped in the village of Mioče near the "Amfora" restaurant by eight armed men wearing camouflage uniforms and with their faces blackened with soot to conceal their identities. The armed men took 16 Muslim men and one woman from the bus and drove them away in a truck without registration plates. The road between Sjeverin and Priboj, both located in Serbia, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia passes through a small part of Bosnia-Herzegovina for 11 kilometres; Mioče village is located in that stretch. According to the Humanitarian Law Centre, a Belgrade-based human rights organization, a witness reported that the truck proceeded towards the Bosnia-Herzegovina town of Višegrad.¹ The victims are: Mujo Alihodžić, Mustafa Bajramović, Ramiz Begović, Ramahudin Ćatović, Esad Džihić, Idriz

¹See The Humanitarian Law Centre, *Spotlight Report 22, "Muslim-Slavs in Serbia and Montenegro: group disappearances during the Armed Conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina,"* May 1996.

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The previous evening, 21 October 1992, Sabahudin Čatović, brother of Ramahudin Čatović, went "missing" from Sjeverin village, where he lived. According to some reports, he shared the fate of the 16 men taken from the bus in Mioče.

The incident attracted much publicity. The Bosnian Serb Army commander General Ratko Mladić publicly condemned the act and denied that his forces had been involved. However, unconfirmed reports claim that the captives were offered to the Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina in exchange for 28 Bosnian Serb soldiers, but that the exchange was rejected. The Belgrade newspaper *Borba*, citing military sources, reported on 24 October 1992 that the victims were killed in Višegrad. The same day, the then-President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), Dobrica Čosić, announced that he had appointed a state commission to investigate the abduction. The Commission has been criticized by relatives of the victims and human rights organizations for failing to report its findings. According to an interview with the head of the commission, its objective was to establish whether the abducted passengers were still alive, and it conveyed its findings to relevant policing, prosecuting, and judicial bodies.² However, no official information about the fate of the passengers has ever been made known either to the public or to the relatives of the "missing".

On 26 October 1992 two suspects, ML and DD, both paramilitary commanders, were arrested while travelling through Sjeverin village by Serbian police³. Although it was announced that ML and DD were being held on suspicion that they had carried out the abduction, it was subsequently revealed that in fact they had not been investigated on this charge but for illegal possession of arms and forgery of identity papers. After five days they were released on the grounds that the investigation was not founded and as the men were members of the *de facto* Bosnian Serb Army they therefore did not fall under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Serbia.

Two years later, the then-Yugoslav president Zoran Lilić was reported in the Belgrade daily *Politika* as saying that Serbian police had "risked their lives" to arrest ML, but handed him over to the Bosnian Serb authorities because the FRY had received promises that he would be tried there.

Serbian and federal officials have stated that they are unable to pursue and prosecute those responsible for the abduction of 16 Yugoslav citizens from Mioče because the crime was carried out on the territory of another, internationally recognized, state. However, in a similar case which occurred on 27 February 1993, two men have been prosecuted for war crimes in a Montenegrin court. In that case paramilitary troops based in Višegrad abducted 21 passengers of non-Serb nationality from a train travelling from Belgrade (FRY) to Bar, Montenegro (FRY) at Štrpci train station where the line briefly passes through Bosnia-Herzegovina. They were never seen again. The families of the "missing", human rights organizations in FRY, and Amnesty International have campaigned for the resolution of this case actively since 1993, and a parliamentary commission

²"Znali smo da ne možemo ništa da učinimo," *Naša Borba*, 12 August 1996, Interview with Vladimir Matović, advisor to former President Čosić about the abduction of Sandžak Muslims.

³The *de facto* leaders of the areas controlled by Bosnian Serbs at that time denied that there were paramilitary forces operating in territory they held and referred to ML and those who served with him as "volunteers" fighting under the command of the Višegrad brigade of the *de facto* Bosnian Serb Army. In practice however, according to the Belgrade newspaper *Borba*, ML's forces were beyond the control of the army or local authorities in Višegrad and because of their military successes enjoyed considerable popular support.

was formed in Montenegro to investigate the incident.⁴ In July 1996 a Serbian citizen of FRY who had been a member of the paramilitary units testified to the Montenegrin police concerning his knowledge of the case, and in October 1996 a suspect was arrested and a warrant was issued for the arrest of another person who had participated in the abduction. The suspect reportedly confessed to having participated in the arbitrary and deliberate killing of the 21 people abducted from the train, and is being tried in Montenegro for "war crimes against a civilian population." The man who confessed implicated ML in the abductions at Štrpci. The Yugoslav authorities, however, have not charged ML with the offence.

Amnesty International believes that the resolution of this and other cases of "missing" and "disappeared" people depends largely on the will of the authorities in FRY and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Amnesty International calls upon the authorities of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Bosnia-Herzegovina to investigate the abduction of 16 Sandžak Muslims from Mioče, Bosnia-Herzegovina on 22 October 1992; to bring those responsible to justice, and to grant appropriate compensation to the victims' relatives.

Background Information

The Sandžak region, which includes border areas of Serbia and Montenegro and adjoins Bosnia-Herzegovina, has a population of between 350,000 and 440,000, approximately half of whom are Muslim Slavs with strong connections to Bosnian Muslim Slavs (Bosniacs). With the outbreak of armed conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992, the situation in the Sandžak became very tense. During 1992 and 1993 thousands of Muslims left the Sandžak after Muslim homes, businesses or cars were destroyed by Serb or Montenegrin paramilitaries and political extremists (some operating from Serb-controlled areas in Bosnia-Herzegovina). In addition to abductions, Amnesty International also received reports of murders of Sandžak Muslims. Although the FRY authorities publicly condemned such crimes, they frequently appeared unable or unwilling to offer effective protection to Muslims and there were indications that the paramilitaries had support from circles within the military and police in the FRY. Instances where perpetrators of violence against Muslims have been identified and brought to justice have been rare.

Many Muslims responded to the situation of insecurity and fear by seeking to obtain weapons and arms - as was generally happening throughout the territories of former Yugoslavia. The authorities sought to prevent this by carrying out mass arms searches in the Sandžak. Sandžak Muslims complained that the Serbian and Montenegrin population was not subjected to similar searches, although they too in many cases armed themselves.

⁴See AI Index EUR 05/08/95, "An Unknown Destination": "Disappeared" in former Yugoslavia, October 1995.