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Croatia: Government must investigate attacks against journalists

The Croatian authorities' failure to address threats against journalists has led to a climate of intimidation, where the journalists work at a great risk to their lives, Amnesty International said today.

The organization's call comes as Drago Hedl, one of the top journalists in the country, received new threats on his life following his investigation which points to the involvement of a high level Croatian politician in the killing of Croatian Serbs in the town of Osijek during the 1991-1995 war.

"The threats against Drago Hedl are a clear attempt to discourage him and other journalists who have been playing a crucial role in exposing human rights violations from making their findings public," said Nicola Duckworth, Director of Europe and Central Asia Programme at Amnesty International. "The Croatian authorities need to lead by example and investigate these threats and bring the perpetrators to justice."

Drago Hedl has received at least four death threats, in relation to investigative articles he has written about war crimes committed in Osijek. On Thursday, he received new threats in the form of text messages sent to his mobile telephone. Hedl was granted police protection after the incident.

Drago Hedl is one of the most prominent Croatian journalists. He has won many international awards for his investigative work, reporting on war crimes committed during the 1991-1995 war in Croatia. He extensively covers war crimes committed in the Osijek area.

"We urge the Croatian authorities to conduct a prompt, impartial and effective investigation to ensure that those responsible for such threats are brought to justice. The organization also calls on the authorities to take effective measures to address the increasing intimidation and sometimes fatal attacks."

Background

Journalists in Croatia have been targeted in various attacks in 2008. To Amnesty International's knowledge, no investigation has been concluded, while none of those responsible has been brought to justice.

In October Ivo Pukanic, owner of the Croatian weekly Nacional, was killed by a car bomb in Zagreb. Reportedly, the killing was related to investigations of activities of organized crime in the former Yugoslavia undertaken by his newspaper.

In June Dušan Miljuš, a journalist for the Croatian daily Jutarnji List, was brutally beaten by unknown individuals in front of his house in Zagreb following his reports on links between politics and illegal business activities.

In November a fake car bomb was planted under Hrvoje Appelt's car. This is believed to be related to his investigation of oil smuggling which reportedly involved organized crime structures from other South-East European countries.