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Albania: Government should honour the rights of former political prisoners

Amnesty International calls on the government of Albania to meet with the Association of Former Politically Persecuted Persons, and to establish a dialogue to promptly address their concerns. Some 24 former political prisoners have been on hunger strike for over three weeks to protest at the government's delays in providing them with compensation, under a law adopted in 2007. According to the Association, only one-eighth of the compensation due has been paid out since 2007. Many of the former prisoners live in extreme poverty.

In recent days the group has escalated their protest. On 8 October, one of the group, Gjergj Ndreca, set himself on fire. Another striker, Llazi Koçi, was badly burnt. A third, Lirak Bejko, attempted the same act on 10 October. Other former political prisoners have been demonstrating outside the parliament in solidarity with the hunger strikers. Many of those on hunger strike are aged and infirm.

Amnesty International welcomes an initial meeting held last Friday - which took place only after the intervention of the US Embassy and the EU delegation in Albania - between the hunger-strikers, and President Bujar Nishani. However, the Prime Minister, Sali Berisha, has continued to state that the protestors are politically motivated. Amnesty International urges him to address their concerns and ensure that outstanding reparations are paid promptly.

Under Communist rule between 1944 and 1991, many opponents of the government were targeted for their political opinions and subjected to imprisonment, exile, deprivation of their property or other persecution under. Those imprisoned were also sentenced to forced labour, often in harsh conditions, and received minimal food rations and little medical care. According to the Association of Former Political Prisoners an estimated 5,577 men and 450 women were executed, and tens of thousands of others imprisoned or sent to labour camps. The law provides that the former prisoners receive compensation of €14.30 for each day of their imprisonment.

The Head of the Delegation of the EU in Albania, Ambassador Ettore Sequi, has appealed for dialogue to address the groups' concerns, as well as individual cases which would not be resolved by the 2007 scheme. Three Albanian human rights organizations - the Albanian Helsinki Committee, the Albanian Human Rights Centre and the Albanian Rehabilitation Centre for Trauma and Torture - have also called on the Assembly to address issue in the next session, or to call an extraordinary session.

While the former prisoners were released and pardoned 20 years ago, they have not received any other form of reparation from the government. Amnesty International considers that they should be eligible to receive full reparations including restitution, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition. Few prisoners, including those who were tortured or subject to other forms of ill-treatment, have received any form of rehabilitation, including psychological support, except that provided by non governmental organizations.

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