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BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA: FIRST HEARING OF HUMAN RIGHTS CHAMBER
CONSIDERS CASE OF "MISSING" MATANOVI S

The Human Rights Chamber, a national human rights institution created under the peace agreement for Bosnia-Herzegovina, will today hold its first hearing in Sarajevo of a case of three people who have been "missing" for 17 months after being taken away by Bosnian Serb police in Prijedor in September 1995.

Father Tomislav Matanovi_ and his parents are among the tens of thousands of "missing" and "disappeared" people from the conflict in former Yugoslavia, whose friends and relatives are still anxious for any news of their fate.

"It is vital that the parties -- here the Republika Srpska -- implement the Chamber's rulings on this and any other case, otherwise the Chamber risks becoming another futile attempt to redress human rights violations in Bosnia-Herzegovina," Amnesty International said today.

"Unless action is taken to ensure that the fate of the "missing" and "disappeared" is uncovered, those who deliberately set out to eliminate people belonging to minorities in the areas they controlled will have succeeded. The agony of the victims' loved ones will continue," the organization added.

Although more than a year has passed since the war ended, authorities on all sides have been reluctant to provide information on the tens of thousands of cases of "missing" and "disappeared" at regular meetings for this purpose chaired by the international community. Such meetings are also attended by associations of the relatives of missing persons.

"The parties must stop bargaining with bodies, and engage instead in open and unconditional discussions to resolve the fates of all those still unaccounted for. In the unfortunate cases where the truth lies buried in mass graves, the international community must provide the necessary resources to enable exhumation for the purpose of identification," Amnesty International said.

Although some countries have begun to donate to a United Nations Voluntary Fund that would provide resources for exhumations not otherwise available to the national authorities, the project is still critically short of contributions.

"The parties should implement the decisions of the Chamber immediately, as required by the Framework Agreement", Amnesty International said today. "Should the Chamber's decisions not be swiftly implemented, the international community should intervene to ensure compliance."

BACKGROUND

Father Tomislav Matanovi_, a Bosnian Croat Roman Catholic priest, was first taken from his home in Prijedor on 24 August 1995, in the last weeks of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, by Bosnian Serb police. Although he was returned again the next day, he and his parents -- Josip and Bo_ena Matanovi_ -- were confined to their home by police until 19 September 1995 when all three were taken to the Urije police station in Prijedor. Since that time, there has been no public acknowledgment of their detention, despite reports that the RS authorities have offered them for exchange on more than one occasion.

The Framework Agreement on Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was initialled in Dayton in November 1995, provided for the establishment of a Human Rights Commission comprising an Ombudsperson and a Human Rights Chamber -- the latter analogous to the European Court of Human Rights -- as the legal institutions of last resort.
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