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CROATIA: HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN THE KRAJINA

Fear of harassment, attacks and killing by soldiers and security forces alike has gripped the people still living in the Krajina region of Croatia, where there has been a policing void in the wake of the 4 August military action by the Croatian army.

In a letter to the Croatian Government, Amnesty International said that extrajudicial executions, "disappearances", ill-treatment, harassment and the systematic destruction of houses have been carried out by members of the Croatian armed forces or internal security forces in the Krajina against the civilian population, and in particular against elderly people.

Following a research mission to the Krajina last week, the international human rights organization is concerned that although many of the abuses occurred in the initial days of military action at the beginning of August as Croatian forces took over Serb controlled regions (former United Nations Protected Areas, Sectors North and South), the full range of violations, in particular the systematic destruction of houses, has continued since then.

In the Mokro Polje area on 18 September four men wearing green military uniforms entered the house of an 82-year-old Serbian woman. One soldier pushed the barrel of the rifle against her lips and shouted to her to open her mouth. After she pushed the barrel away a second held a knife to her throat and demanded money. Another woman of the same age reported that she was made to strip naked at knife-point in her home by a single soldier in camouflage who demanded money. Both women no longer dare to remain alone in their houses and have taken shelter with neighbours.

"Our fears for the safety and security of these people stems from the apparent absence of adequate policing of these territories, as a result of which the remaining Serbian population enjoys only limited protection against further abuses or harassment by soldiers or civilians," Amnesty International delegates said.

On 12 September two armed Croatian soldiers entered the house of an 84-year-old man, who is partially deaf and blind, asking whether he had weapons. As they left they threw hand grenades into the house while he was inside causing him light injuries from the shrapnel and leaving no window intact.

"We fear that reports such as these are not isolated and that many people have been killed or injured as this policy of systematically destroying houses was applied," Amnesty International said. "Burning houses is also clearly an effective way of disposing of or hiding evidence of other violations."

Amnesty International believes that house destruction has been carried out by soldiers or with official sanction and constitutes a form of collective punishment against Serbs in the area and a key factor in discouraging their return.

Amnesty International has reports of the possible extrajudicial execution of scores of civilians. The organization's delegates found two decomposing bodies in one village with

indications that they had been unlawfully killed. Elsewhere, they heard reports of extrajudicial execution by soldiers in which local people had buried the bodies themselves.

Reports by UN personnel and journalists state that in the village of Grubori, where it is confirmed that Croatian Special Police were operating, at least five people were killed. The body of an 80-year-old man was found lying in his bed in a pool of blood with clear signs of having been shot in the head at close range. The bullet had entered behind his left ear and exited through his throat. Another man was found dead in a field, two other with gunshot wounds to the head, and the remains of a 90-year-old woman were found in the ruins of her partially burned house.

"As a result of the poor security conditions in which much of the remaining Serbian population lives, there have been a number of cases of unlawful killings or extrajudicial executions which local people have been too scared to report to the authorities or representatives of other organizations in the area," Amnesty International said.

The organization found that Serbs who remain in the Knin area were extremely fearful for their security. They complained that the Croatian civilian police was rarely seen in their villages, although uniformed soldiers or civilians were frequently in the area. Civilian police were frequently seen on the main roads and towns, while only the Special Police units were seen in villages, something which does nothing to reassure the remaining Serbian population -- as they are effectively soldiers trained for special operations.

"Some of the many individuals who remain unaccounted for more than seven weeks after the Croatian forces took control may actually have 'disappeared'. More than 120 of 200 newly-dug graves in the Knin cemetery are unidentified, making the resolution of 'disappeared' or missing people more difficult," the human rights organization said.

Amnesty International has called on the Croatian Government to order soldiers and policemen to refrain from any acts of violence or intimidation against civilians; give effective and visible protection to all individuals; to initiate thorough, impartial and independent investigations into all allegations of extrajudicial execution, "disappearance", ill-treatment, the destruction of houses or other human rights violations and to bring people suspected of perpetrating human rights violations to justice.

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