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Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Kosovo province)

Latest allegations of massacres again underline desperate need for international human rights monitors

New allegations of the massacre of ethnic Albanian civilians in Kosovo yet again underline the need for a full investigation into the alleged massacre and for the presence of international human rights monitors, Amnesty International said today.

At least 16 people, 10 of whom were women and children, were reportedly killed last Saturday in the village of Gornje Obrinje. Among them was a pregnant woman. The majority of the victims were reportedly shot at close range and some showed signs of mutilation. They appeared to have been taking refuge from fighting in a wood close to their homes. Local people told reporters that Serbian police or Yugoslav Army personnel were responsible.

Although the Serbian authorities have denied involvement in the massacre and announced an "urgent investigation" into this incident they have consistently refused to hold independent and impartial investigations into such allegations or to bring perpetrators to justice.

"The pattern of human rights abuses and impunity for perpetrators in Kosovo is indisputable," Amnesty International said. "Abuses like those alleged at Obrinje spotlight the need to protect the displaced and refugees from Kosovo and put their human rights on the agenda as much as their humanitarian needs."

"Calls for them to return to their homes will be premature while gross human rights abuses are committed with impunity and are not promptly and impartially investigated and redressed," the organization added.

However, the international community is failing to give full effect to measures to monitor human rights and impunity. Last week's United Nations (UN) Security Council resolution (1199/98) emphasized the monitoring by European Union Monitors and international diplomatic monitors without addressing the need for access by specialized human rights monitors such as those of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights who has been denied an office in Priština and an expanded mission.

On 8 September the President of the UN International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (Tribunal) wrote to the Presidency of the UN Security Council highlighting how Yugoslavia's continued failure, in defiance of international law and the Security Council itself, to hand over suspects indicted as part of its Croatia investigations threatened to make the Tribunal's Kosovo investigations meaningless. The Security Council has so far failed to respond directly to the demands of the Tribunal, which the Security Council itself founded.

Last week's Security Council resolution called on the Yugoslav authorities to cooperate with the Tribunal and to bring perpetrators to justice itself, but failed to address the Tribunal's principal concerns over the non-arrest of suspects.

Next week the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees holds its annual Executive Committee meeting in which, among other issues, UN member states will set out UNHCR policy affecting Kosovo refugees. In the face of borders which are closing to Kosovo's refugees and displaced, Amnesty International will be addressing state delegations with a report calling on them to share the burden of Kosovo's displaced and refugees and prevent their premature involuntary return while this cannot be effected in safety and dignity.

Amnesty International will be emphasizing that efforts to deliver humanitarian assistance are not enough, the rights of refugees and displaced persons to protection under international law, particularly protection under the UN Refugee Convention, must be upheld.
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