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Serbia: Release detained human rights activists

Amnesty International is concerned about reports on the arrest and detention of nine Bulgarian nationals, a Slovak and a Finnish national by the Serbian authorities, in what appears to be attempts to prevent the holding of peaceful demonstrations.

The individuals, who had reportedly travelled to Serbia to participate in peaceful demonstrations against the Chinese authorities' actions towards Falun Gong practitioners during a summit of leaders from Central Eastern Europe and China in the capital Belgrade, were taken from their hotels by police and detained.

The planned demonstration against the policies of the Chinese government was banned by the local police authority a few days ago, without any justification provided to the organizer.

Beside those detained, two activists, travelling from Finland, were refused entry at the airport border, reportedly on the basis of a list held by the authorities, and were immediately deported on the return flight. They were subsequently informed about the detention of the eleven activists.

One of those detained, Lihua Lan, a Finnish citizen, was allowed to enter Serbia, but was subsequently arrested at her hotel on 15 December, and taken to the Detention Removal Centre at Padinska skela. She was informed that she would not be released to leave the country until at least this Friday, the date of her return flight. While Amnesty International understands she was in possession of the necessary travel documents, she, as well as nine Bulgarian and one Slovak national, was held under Article 49 of the Law on Foreigners, which provides for detention until deportation for "A foreigner who cannot be forcibly removed immediately or a foreigner whose identity has not been ascertained or who does not possess a travel document".

The NGO Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) asked the Minister of Interior and the Minister of Justice to provide information about the procedures against those detained.

Amnesty International is concerned that the Serbian authorities are acting unlawfully, and urges them to immediately end any detention based solely on the persons' intention to exercise their right to peaceful assembly.