

Bosnia-Herzegovina: Violence against minorities in Republika Srpska must stop

The rising incidence of violent attacks against members of minority groups returning to the Republika Srpska (RS) entity of Bosnia-Herzegovina is of increasing concern, Amnesty International said.

"These attacks -- most of which are believed to have been deliberately organized -- undermine the entire return process," Amnesty International said. "They not only violate individuals' right to return in safety and with dignity, but also reinforce fears amongst a vulnerable returnee community already traumatized by years of war."

In one year, 290 minority-return related violent incidents were reported between August 2000 and August 2001 across the whole of Bosnia-Herzegovina. One hundred and ninety-three of them occurred in the RS, according to the United Nations International Police Task Force (IPTF). Local and international organizations report not only a higher incidence of violent attacks against minorities in the RS, but a marked increase in the severity of the attacks.

The four people killed so far this year have been Bosniacs (Bosnian Muslims) returning to areas from which they had been expelled or fled during the war. The youngest victim, a 16-year-old Bosniac girl, Meliha Duric, was shot dead on 12 July in a small returnee settlement in Dزامdici near Vlasenica. Her murder remains unresolved.

More recently, Ibrahim Ramulic, a Bosniac male returnee was killed in a knife attack that took place around 3 November near Prijedor. Although the circumstances of the attack, in which he sustained multiple and severe injuries, remain unconfirmed, there are indications that it may have been ethnically motivated.

There has been some improvement in the investigation and prosecution of return-related violence in the entity this year after continuous pressure and intervention by the international agencies overseeing the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement. Nevertheless, in most cases the RS police forces continue to fail to promptly and thoroughly investigate such attacks -- despite having often been provided with extensive support and expertise by the IPTF. Several police commanders and officers, who had compromised and obstructed investigations into ethnically motivated violence, were removed from their functions by the IPTF Commissioner this year.

"The RS authorities must ensure the respect and protection of both the lives and property of all citizens -- regardless of their ethnic origin," Amnesty International urged.

"In the climate of virtual impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of these attacks the safety of returning refugees cannot be guaranteed."

Background

Over 56,000 minority returns have been registered throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina so far this year -- roughly double the number of such returns in the year 2000. With markedly better implementation of the property legislation in both entities of the country - the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the RS - as well as the Brcko district, a significant breakthrough in the return of minorities was achieved during 2000. Yet the overall pace of implementation and repossession is still too slow, particularly in the RS where just over 20% of all claims for the return of housing have so far been settled.

Major problems remain with the sustainability of such returns, as returnees continue to face discrimination in gaining access to employment, education and social welfare. The lack of physical safety in many areas where people have returned, in particular in eastern RS, is compounded by the impunity enjoyed by those thought to have committed grave human rights violations against non-Serbs during the war. These individuals overwhelmingly remain at large and often in positions of considerable local influence.

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