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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL APPEALS TO GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIVES TO FINALLY RESOLVE THE ISSUE OF MISSING PERSONS

From 24-26 March 1999 senior government representatives from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia will be meeting to consider the vast outstanding caseload of people still unaccounted for following the armed conflicts of 1991-1995. The meeting will be held in Amsterdam under the auspices of the International Commission for Missing Persons.

Amnesty International is calling upon these representatives and their governments to live up to their responsibilities to provide the relatives of over 20,000 missing persons with information on the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones.

While the world's attention has moved on following the signing of the peace agreement for Bosnia-Herzegovina and the reintegration of formerly Serb-held territories into Croatian Government control and while the outbreak of armed conflict in the Kosovo province has caused a flood of reports of grave human rights abuses, the unsolved cases of missing persons from 1991-1995 risk becoming another statistic of war.

Yet the relatives of those still unaccounted for cannot rebuild their lives and reconcile themselves with the events of the past until they find out what happened to their loved ones. At the same time the perpetrators of "disappearances" and deliberate and arbitrary killings should not be allowed to enjoy impunity for the human rights violations they have committed, thus encouraging others to repeat these crimes.

It is the moral and legal duty of those responsible at governmental levels to stop their political bargaining and use their knowledge and authority to solve the problem.

Moreover, in a post-war context, unresolved "disappearances" as a legacy of armed conflict present a serious impediment to the normalization and reconciliation processes and to the development of a culture of respect for the most basic human rights.

It is widely believed that the majority of those unaccounted for following the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina are dead. Many of them are probably the victims of deliberate killings who are buried in mass graves all over the country.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina improved cooperation between the three commissions on missing persons last year led to a significant increase in the exhumations of such graves across the ethnic divisions in the country. However the amount of work still to be done and the difficulties in the identification of those exhumed remains daunting.

By contrast, little progress was achieved in the continuing negotiations between the Croatian and Federal Yugoslav government representatives on the issue of the missing. Yet many of the cases still unresolved involve people who “disappeared” as far back as 1991. The fate of the hundreds of Croatian Serbs who went missing after the “Flash” and “Storm” offensives by Croatian security forces in 1995 remains unclear.

On the eve of the Amsterdam meeting, Amnesty International has appealed to the Croatian representative to implement the recommendations with regards to “disappearances” that the organization made to the Croatian Government in August 1998 on the third anniversary of the “Storm” offensive.

Amnesty International has similarly lobbied the Federal Yugoslav representative to give urgent attention to clarifying the fate of more than one thousand Croats that still remain unaccounted for.

In the interest of securing justice for the victims of “disappearances” and their families, Amnesty International has once more appealed to the Federal Yugoslav Government to transfer to the custody of the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia the three Yugoslav citizens who have been publicly indicted for the abduction of some 260 unarmed persons from Vukovar Hospital in November 1991.

Background

For many years Amnesty International has been reporting and campaigning on behalf of the thousands of persons who “disappeared” or went “missing” in former Yugoslavia because of their ethnic or national background, sex, political views, personal affiliations or their positions in their local communities. Many relatives who spoke with Amnesty International recalled their endless and painful attempts to spur the competent authorities into action. They often went to great lengths and ran personal risks to obtain information about the circumstances of the “disappearance”. They sought details of possible detention locations or burial sites and descriptions of state or *de facto* state agents they thought to be involved in or responsible for the “disappearance”.

However, on the whole the authorities have failed to act on this information, thereby not only sharing responsibility for the “disappearances” and perpetuating the suffering of the victims’ relatives, but also consolidating the impunity with which these human rights violations were committed.

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