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Croatia/FRY: Vukovar - ten years of impunity for massive human rights violations

On the tenth anniversary of the fall of Vukovar (18th November), Amnesty International expressed its great disappointment at the continuing failure of the authorities of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) to arrest those indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Vukovar by the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (Tribunal).

The Tribunal's Prosecutor has indicted three former officers of the then Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Vukovar, in particular the killings of over 200 unarmed men taken from the Vukovar hospital on 20 November 1991.

"Despite several requests by the Prosecutor to surrender these men to the Tribunal's custody, the FRY authorities have not done so," Amnesty International said. The organization recognizes the internal problems that the FRY has to confront in order to ensure cooperation with the Tribunal, but stresses that as a UN member state the FRY must respect its obligations to cooperate fully as set out by the Security Council resolution which established the Tribunal.

"The need for justice for the victims and their relatives in Vukovar is overwhelming," Amnesty International said, stressing that impunity for the massive human rights violations committed in Vukovar and other parts of eastern Slavonia must be brought to an end. The organization believes that establishing individual responsibility for these crimes would significantly assist the process of reconciliation, and reintegration of those returning to Vukovar after years of displacement.

Background

On 18 November 1991 the eastern Slavonian town of Vukovar fell to the JNA after a three month siege. JNA forces, aided by Serb paramilitaries, are reported to have committed a large number of grave human rights violations during the armed conflict in 1991 in this region, including deliberate and arbitrary killings, torture, including rape and the forceful expulsion of large parts of the non-Serb population. Over 600 people are still listed as missing in the Vukovar-Srijem region, many of them having "disappeared" during or after the fighting.

Mile Mrksic, Miroslav Radic and Veselin Sljivancanin were publicly indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity in 1995 in one of the first indictments issued by the Prosecutor. They are all charged with the command and supervision of the transfer of at least 200 Croatian and other non-Serb individuals from Vukovar hospital to a nearby farm in Ovcar. At the farm they were beaten and tortured for hours, before being executed.

In October 2001, former FRY President Slobodan Milosevic -- currently awaiting trial before the Tribunal for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Kosovo -- was in addition

charged with crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in Croatia in 1991 and 1992. The charges include individual and command responsibility for large-scale crimes committed in eastern Slavonia in late 1991.

Three other indicted suspects have been arrested in the FRY and surrendered to the custody of the Tribunal during 2001; three others have voluntarily surrendered. The most recent arrest, on 8 November, of Bosnian Serbs Predrag and Nenad Banovic, indicted for war crimes at the Keraterm detention camp in Bosnia-Herzegovina, triggered protests by the Serbian State Security Police. This has precipitated another political crisis around the legislation which the FRY claims it needs in order to fully cooperate with the Tribunal.

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