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Croatia: Three years since operations *Flash* and *Storm* -- three years of justice and dignity denied

Continuing impunity for hundreds of killings by Croatian forces in the 1995 offensives is a disturbing indication of what might be in store for the victims and their survivors in the latest conflict in the region - in Kosovo province - Amnesty International said today, in a new report issued on the third anniversary of *Operation Storm*, one of two Croatian offensives which brought the Krajina area into Croatian Government control.

At the time of operations *Flash* and *Storm*, significant publicity was given to the hundreds of killings - including well-documented extrajudicial executions - by Croatian forces, and other human rights violations like "disappearances", torture including rape, massive and systematic house destruction, attempts at forcible expulsions, and ill-treatment.

Three years later, and despite the international community's demands for action from the Croatian authorities, relatives of the victims are still being denied the dignity of a proper burial for their loved ones, and hundreds of crimes remain unacknowledged, uninvestigated, and the perpetrators unpunished.

"For the relatives of the missing and "disappeared," dignity means a grave where they can mourn. For the relatives of victims buried in "garden graves", it means a properly marked grave where descendants will also be able to commemorate the dead. For relatives of those whose remains are buried in the sardine-like rows of wooden crosses in town cemeteries, it is burial in the family plot with a proper headstone," Amnesty International said.

The Croatian authorities have attempted to convince Amnesty International and the international community that they have taken appropriate measures in response to the human rights violations committed following the security forces' offensives.

However, former police officers have testified in court that their orders were not to protect the civilian population, as the authorities have reported to the international community, but to protect cultural objects or to shoot at anything which moved.

The killing of at least five and likely six mostly elderly Croatian Serbs in Grubori hamlet in the Plavno valley is the most notorious case which has been blatantly ignored by the Croatian authorities. However, there are hundreds of other cases where the victims have not received the justice, or dignity, they deserve.

The authorities never provided detail on specific cases brought to their attention but instead responded by indicating that large numbers of investigations and prosecutions were underway. Of the 2,849 cases which the authorities claimed were before the courts in June 1996, less than two per cent concerned killings -- although according to the authorities' own statistics more than 450 of the 900 bodies they buried were those of civilians.

In January 1998, the authorities claimed 5,580 cases were before the courts, but rather than reflect additional cases from operations *Flash* and *Storm*, these numbers also reflect criminal acts which were committed between 1996 and 1998. Although the authorities promised priority to the handful of human rights cases which did lead to prosecutions, several have not yet come to trial although indictments were issued in 1995 or 1996.

“Although many witnesses are still too afraid to report crimes, the Croatian authorities are not absolved of their duty to investigate and bring to justice those found responsible,” Amnesty International said. “Evidence and documentation from international organizations in 1995 should be included in prosecutions in national courts.”

The continuing impunity is a huge contributing factor in the continued Croatian Serb lack of confidence in the Croatian authorities, Amnesty International said. Hundreds of thousands of Croatian Serbs who fled the 1991-1995 conflict in their homeland remain exiled in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, including in Kosovo province.

In Kosovo, Croatian Serb refugees have found themselves at the centre of a new tragedy: despatched there as the unwitting victims of political manipulation by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia authorities, they are now targets of the armed ethnic Albanian opposition.

The Amnesty International report calls on the Croatian authorities to initiate prompt, independent, impartial and thorough investigations and prosecutions. The organization also recommends that the authorities give reparation to victims and undertake measures to prevent future violations in strict accordance with international law and standards.

The organization also calls on the Croatian government to investigate whether any attempt was made to cover up the crimes committed during and after operations *Flash* and *Storm*.

“The grave crimes committed during and in the wake of operations *Flash* and *Storm* have been all but forgotten,” Amnesty International said. “Are the Croatian authorities to be allowed to teach the lesson that if one sits out the outrage and criticism, eventually the international community will lose interest and move on? Unless action is taken, the vast majority of perpetrators may never have to face their crimes, and the facts risk being lost to history.”

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