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Macedonia: Killing of police no justification for human rights violations

The Macedonian government should investigate serious human rights violations which occurred in Aracinovo earlier this year and ensure that they are never repeated, Amnesty International said today releasing its report, *"After the Aracinovo murders: Torture, ill-treatment and possible extrajudicial execution"*.

Dozens of people -- all of them ethnic Albanians -- from Aracinovo village and Skopje town were tortured, beaten or otherwise ill-treated following the murder of three police officers at the village on January 11. Many men were held incommunicado for up to 11 days and there were strong indications that Sabri Asani, who died in custody, may have been extrajudicially executed.

"The murder of the police officers was a very serious crime, but no crime, however heinous, justifies human rights violations such as these," Amnesty International said.

"The courts are the only place where guilt should be determined and punishments enacted. A vigorous police reaction to find the killers may have been justified, but all police actions must be in accordance with the law and international human rights standards," the organization added.

Police searches of the houses of ethnic Albanians in Aracinovo were characterized by the use of excessive force. On 14 January men and boys were beaten in several houses. One man had his jaw broken, reportedly with a police rifle butt. Six men and two 15-year-old boys were made to lie face down outside another house and were kicked and beaten as they lay. A 70-year-old man was allowed to sit up, but the others were reportedly kept on the ground for up to three hours. The ill-treatment was allegedly accompanied by references to their Albanian ethnicity. Old men, women and children were allegedly guarded at gunpoint by police for three hours in another house.

At least eight men were taken to police stations that day with hoods over their heads. They were held until late at night and subjected to further beatings and questioning about the murder of the police officers.

Detainees arrested on other days were reportedly kept incommunicado, tortured or ill-treated and denied basic rights such as access to a defence lawyer of their choice. At least eight remain in custody and are under investigation, and some of them reportedly started a hunger-strike last week. At least one is known to have withdrawn a statement he alleges was extracted under torture.

"While the authorities have acknowledged that there have been some violations, their response on the whole has been totally inadequate," Amnesty International said, calling for a full, impartial and independent investigation into the human rights violations following the Aracinovo incident.

In the case of Sabri Asani's death, five months on, his family have yet to receive a copy of the autopsy report on his body, despite repeated requests. Amnesty International is

calling for the pathologist's report to be urgently released, for thorough investigations to be carried out into the circumstances of his death and for those responsible to be brought to justice.

A video tape of Sabri Asani's body shows what appears to be the entry wound of a bullet in his left temple. An experienced pathologist who viewed the tape for Amnesty International noted that marks around the entry wound suggested that the bullet had been fired at very close range. The body otherwise showed evidence of having been badly beaten.

"The incident demonstrates an urgent need to review policing methods and improve police training," Amnesty International said.

The Ministry of the Interior publicly apologized for some of the arrests on 14 January, who were said to have been carried out "by mistake", and promised an investigation. The victims have heard nothing from the authorities except for the payment of some financial compensation for damage to their houses during the searches.

A report issued in February by the national human rights Ombudsman found that serious human rights violations had occurred and called for thorough investigations, including criminal charges against the police officers responsible. The report has remained unheeded by the Interior Ministry despite a reminder issued by the Ombudsman in May.

Background

According to official figures in Macedonia 67 per cent of the population are Macedonians and 23 per cent is made up of ethnic Albanians. However, ethnic Albanian leaders claim that the ethnic Albanian population is larger. Since independence, the issue of the status and rights of the ethnic Albanian population has been one of the key political issues in the republic. In the context of political confrontations in past years between ethnic Albanians and the government, ethnic Albanian demonstrators -- some of whom became violent -- have been subject to human rights abuses. There are also reports of incidents of ill-treatment by police involving Macedonians and Roma as well as ethnic Albanians.

The murders of the police officers in Aracinovo were not ostensibly political. However, the fact that the murdered officers were two Macedonians and an ethnic Turk killed in a village with a large Albanian majority and that the police reaction focussed on ethnic Albanian suspects gave them strong political connotations.

Some evidence indicates that over the past two years -- a period including a change of government at the end of 1998 -- there have been efforts by the police to improve standards and reduce the incidence of ill-treatment. Whatever progress has been made, the findings in Amnesty International's new report highlight that serious problems remain.

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To request a copy of the report "*After the Aracinovo murders: Torture, ill-treatment and possible extrajudicial execution*", please contact the Amnesty International press office on +44 207 4135566. For more information call Paul Miller in Skopje on +389 70 278 084