

21 December 2000

AI Index EUR 11/002/2000 - News Service Nr. 241

Albania: "A disturbing pattern of disregard for basic human rights"

Amnesty International has written to the President of Albania to express concern over reports that supporters of the Democratic Party were ill-treated during arrest or in detention following last month's sometimes violent demonstrations.

Among those reported to have been ill-treated was Besnik Papa, arrested on 29 November and held at a police station in Tirana where, it is alleged, he was so severely beaten that he required hospital treatment for broken teeth, injuries to his jaw and severe bruising on his back and legs. The Democratic Party, the main opposition, has been holding daily demonstrations in Tirana and elsewhere since the beginning of November, claiming that the previous month's municipal elections were rigged.

The letter noted that the torture and ill-treatment of detainees, including criminal suspects, by police officers in Albania was a persistent problem which had also existed under the previous government of the Democratic Party.

The organization requested information as to whether police officers responsible for beating and injuring five non-political detainees in Tirana's Prison 302 this month would be brought to justice, although it did note that the five were reported to have recently ended their hunger-strike protest after meeting a government official.

Amnesty International acknowledged that police officers in Albania have themselves often been targeted, sometimes fatally, by criminals, and that following a break-down in law and order in 1997 the task of law enforcement was a particularly difficult one. However, under Albanian law and international human rights treaties ratified by Albania, torture and ill-treatment are prohibited in all circumstances.

"It is essential that those responsible for enforcing Albanian law are not themselves above the law," the organization said. "The population must be confident that anybody who violates human rights is held to account for what they have done."

Although some police officers have been suspended or dismissed from duty for ill-treating detainees, it is still extremely rare for them to be brought to justice. Amnesty International noted in the letter that since the beginning of the year lawyers, local human rights organizations and the press had reported serious instances of ill-treatment of detainees by police in the town of Elbasan. Several of the victims were reported to have suffered severe, perhaps permanent, injuries. At least five cases against Elbasan police officers were reported to be under investigation, and Amnesty International asked the President that it be kept informed of the progress of these investigations, some of which allegedly implicate the Elbasan chief of police.

Amnesty International called on President Mejdani to take all measures necessary to promote respect for the law, and to ensure that all allegations of torture and ill-treatment are promptly, impartially and thoroughly investigated and that any police officers found to have ill-treated detainees are brought to justice and the victims granted fair and adequate compensation.
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