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ALBANIA

BRIEFING ON RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Reform of policing: an absolute priority

Current developments in Albania have highlighted the need for all political parties taking part in the interim government formed under premier Bashkim Fino to make a reform of policing an absolute priority. Such reform, long desirable, should make all police forces -- including the secret service -- fully accountable and disband the informal forces which have terrorized the opposition and the independent press. The post of Minister of the Interior is a key appointment in the interim government, and the new minister should not miss this chance to initiate reform.

While the complexity and difficulty of the task of bringing civil disturbances to an end and imposing order should be recognized, it should be stressed that Albania is a signatory to international human rights treaties which state that, even in times of emergency, certain human rights, such as the rights to life and freedom from torture, must not be violated.

Arrests, ill-treatment and violent attacks on opposition politicians and journalists -- which have increased considerably over the past year -- have contributed to the extreme polarization of the population and the lack of respect for law and order which now make the achievement of a peaceful consensus so difficult. Those in authority, of whatever party, need to promote a culture of tolerance in which basic human rights, including the right to peaceful assembly, freedom of expression and freedom from arbitrary arrest and torture is granted to all citizens, regardless of their political views, and is not the exclusive prerogative of those who support the ruling party.

Background to the developments

On 9 March, President Belisha and opposition parties reached an agreement for an all-party interim government pending elections by June. On 11 March parliament adopted a law granting amnesty to civilians and military who had committed crimes in connection with the insurgence in the past month, with the exception of those who had committed murder, as well as to those who hand in arms within a week. However, much of the south of the country continues to defy central government and to call for President Belisha's resignation, following weeks of anti-government protest against failed investment schemes which escalated into armed insurrection.

More than 40 people are said to have been killed so far, and scores of others injured, many of them apparently by accident. Local populations in the south have reportedly continued to plunder weapons and ammunition from police stations and army bases, a practice that is now spreading further north, as more towns come under the control of insurgents.

Demands put forward by the main opposition party, the Socialist Party, have reportedly included the demand for the release of its leader, Fatos Nano, imprisoned since 1993 on charges of embezzlement and falsification of documents. Amnesty International believes that the charges against him were not supported by evidence and were politically motivated. The organization has repeatedly called for his release.

Under the state of emergency declared on 2 March the police and secret service, the National Intelligence Service, known as SHIK, were merged under the leadership of the head of the secret service who was appointed commander of the operations against the insurgents in the south. It appears that in practice this official is accountable only to the President of Albania. Plain clothes secret service officers, as well as police, their numbers increased by officers transferred from the provinces, are reported to have taken part in operations against demonstrators in Tirana and Vlora. Men in plain clothes, presumed to be officers of the secret service or their agents, appear to have been responsible for numerous arrests of opposition figures and journalists in recent weeks.

The role of "para-police" forces

A number of incidents have brought to light the existence of other informal groups, alleged to have been recruited by the ruling party to intimidate the opposition. These groups appear to be linked with, or at least tolerated by, legal law enforcement bodies. It is generally claimed that their members -- commonly described as "bandits" -- have been recruited, with promises of good pay, amongst the unemployed and criminals. In Fier, the local Democratic Party chairman told journalists for *Reuters* news agency on 14 February: "We are organising a group of our own supporters to protect people from these illegal demonstrations". He reportedly would not say whether this group was among the men in civilian clothes who had attacked with sticks and iron bars protesters waving red and white roses in the town the previous day, injuring three so severely they were admitted to hospital. On that occasion, witnesses said, the police stood by and did not intervene.

However, the presence of these "para-police forces" has been most marked in Tirana where their chief victims, opposition leaders and independent journalists, are to be found. While they are sometimes reported to have been equipped with the shields and helmets of riot police, at other times they are said to have been partly dressed in military uniform or in civilian clothes. The regular police and the secret police are clearly aware of their activities and appear to have allowed them to operate with impunity.

A violent campaign of intimidation against the opposition and the media

The independent and opposition press has in the last 10 days ceased to publish, partly due to the introduction of censorship under the state of emergency but also as a result of a clear campaign of intimidation. In the early hours of 3 March, for instance, a band of men in plainclothes set fire to the offices of the independent newspaper *Koha Jone*; a few hours before unidentified men had fired at the offices from a car, injuring the building's guard. A similar band also attacked the "Fideli" cafe in the centre of town where journalists regularly meet. Alfred Peza, legal correspondent for *Koha Jone*,

was arrested while accompanying a foreign journalist and held by police in Fier, where he was beaten. He was released two days later, severely bruised. Still on 3 March, another *Koha Jone* journalist, Zamir Dule, and his driver, Anesti Nikolla, were seized and beaten by men in civilian clothes. On the night of 4 March, the home of Shpëtim Nazarko, owner of the independent newspaper *Dita Informacion*, was attacked by men who reportedly fired several hundred rounds of ammunition at the house. Many journalists have gone into hiding or left the country.

On 27 January, Ndre Legisi, a leading member of the Socialist Party was returning home at about 8pm when men in plainclothes attacked and beat him about the head and face. They drove away in a car, and he was found by passers-by who took him to hospital in a coma. A forensic doctor found that he had a fractured skull, caused by a blunt instrument. The previous day he had taken part in an opposition rally in Tirana. Democratic Party sources reportedly claimed that he had been injured in a car accident.

On 9 February a group of about 12 men, partly dressed in military uniform and carrying rubber truncheons, entered the "Fideli" cafe and beat leaders of the centre-left Democratic Alliance Party there, including Neritan Ceka, Arben Demeti, Blendi Gonxhe and Preç Zogaj. When journalists sitting nearby attempted to intervene the men pulled out guns and then left, breaking the cafe's windows. Police arrived shortly afterwards and apparently took no immediate steps to arrest the men; it is alleged that they later arrested several of them, but on returning to the police station received instructions to release them. Earlier, on 26 January, another Democratic Alliance leader, Dr Shahin Kadare, had reportedly been beaten by five men in plain clothes, near the Hotel Tirana, after a protest demonstration.

In other instances, journalists and opposition leaders have been arrested and beaten by men in plain clothes who subsequently took them to police stations and who appear to have been secret police officers.

On 19 January, leaders of all the major opposition parties had gathered to hold a demonstration in Tirana's main square, in defiance of a police ban. About half an hour before the demonstration was due to start, riot police began to arrest opposition leaders and put them into police vans. Kastriot Islami, a Socialist Party leader, was meantime making notes of the registration numbers of the police vans and of a convoy of cars driven by Democratic Party supporters who had been following and jeering at the opposition. He was suddenly grabbed by about three men dressed in plain clothes; one of them hit him with a rubber truncheon while another struck him with a metal object (possibly a police radio). They pushed him into a car and drove him to a police station, continuing to beat him on the way. At the police station, Islami asked an officer who his captors were. The officer claimed not to know, but when Kastriot Islami attempted to leave, the officer ordered him to stay. He was detained for two hours on the second floor of the building (where reports indicate the headquarters of the Tirana SHIK force is located), together with other opposition leaders. On release, Islami needed medical treatment for his injuries, including a wound on his head which required five stitches.

The Minister of the Interior publicly denied that same evening that Kastriot Islami had been beaten by secret police, saying he had been attacked by passersby and "rescued" by police. Subsequently, late at night on 27 to 28 February, men in two or three cars came to Islami's house, beat on the door and tried to break their way in.

Gëzim Saliu, an unemployed doctor from Vlora, was arrested by armed plainclothes police officers on 12 February in Tirana where he had taken part in protests. According to his account, he had stepped forward to help a woman who had been beaten by a police officer. Five men in plainclothes carrying rubber truncheons then set on him, beat him and took him in a police van to a police station, where he was left bleeding on the cement floor. An hour later, when it was noticed that he was unconscious, he was taken to hospital, with concussion and injuries to his ribs.

While the left-wing opposition has been the most frequent target of this persecution, right-wingers have not been spared either. On 13 February, Kurt Kola, chairman of the Association of Former Political Prisoners, and Petrit Kalakula, leader of the Democratic Right Party, were beaten by a group of men in plainclothes. Two days later, on 15 February, armed men in plainclothes, equipped with a police radio, entered the offices of *Republika*, the newspaper of the right-wing Republican Party, and seized Genc Çobani, associate editor-in-chief. They drove him to a lake on the outskirts of city, and interrogated him about his presence in Vlora the previous day at a meeting between protesters and the Republican Party. When he refused to respond, they beat him violently and then abandoned him. On 17 February, Çobani was admitted urgently to hospital, suffering from impaired eyesight and paralysis of his left leg. This incident recalled an earlier one, in May last year, involving Bardhok Lala, a journalist for *Dita Informacion*. He was arrested by men in plainclothes after observing a demonstration in protest against elections held two days previously, which had been widely criticized for vote-rigging and intimidation. Lala too was taken to the lake, beaten, subjected to a mock execution, and left at the site, severely injured.

Zef Mirakaj, an American citizen of Albanian origin, published a statement in the Albanian press on 2 February in which he complained that he had been arrested and beaten by men in plainclothes while on his way to a right-wing rally in Tirana on 20 January: "A reddish car stopped near me and two men in plainclothes...got out. They grabbed me by my arms and hair and threw me violently into the back seat... The first blow was on my forehead...and this was followed by a second and third on the left side of my head. I suffered further intense pain when the same person squeezed my genitals ...they covered my head with a blanket or a jacket..so tightly that I could hardly breathe... We drove on for some 20 minutes while they continued to swear at me in the most degrading terms. The blows lessened and even ceased after they realized that I was an American citizen... Finally, the car stopped. They pulled me out... and I sensed that we were climbing some steps... at one point they stopped me, took everything out of my pockets and removed the cover from my head. I found myself in a cell. At about 12.40 they returned my belongings, with the exception of a packet of cigarettes and some walnut kernels. Only when I left the building did I see that I had been in Police Station number 1."
