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Macedonia: Adoption of agreement - a step forward for human rights.

Amnesty International considers yesterday's vote by a substantial majority in the Macedonian Parliament in favour of the Framework Agreement, as an opportunity to ensure greater respect for human rights in Macedonia through the establishment of the principle of non-discrimination and equal treatment of all under the law.

The agreement provides for redress of past human rights abuses and the institutionalized discrimination against ethnic minorities which has contributed in the past months to political instability and serious violations of basic human rights. It also provides for constitutional amendments which guarantee the internationally recognized human rights of all citizens of Macedonia and, in particular, the expansion of the mandate of the Public Attorney (Ombudsperson) to redress alleged violations of those rights by public authorities.

The organization welcomes measures proposed for human rights training - with the assistance of the international community - of members of the police force and other actors in the criminal justice system. "This is particularly important in the light of concerns expressed by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, over the past 10 years, about many documented cases of ill-treatment and torture, and unfair trials of ethnic Albanians and other minorities," the organization said.

The commitment of all parties to ensure the safe and sustainable return of all displaced persons and refugees, including those who fled without documentation, was also welcomed by the organization.

However, despite the encouraging messages sent by the signing of the agreement, and yesterday's vote in approving the Ohrid Agreement, Amnesty International is concerned that explicit references to international human rights standards are missing from the document.

The organization is further concerned that many provisions of the agreement do not adequately address the rights of other minorities - Roma and Egyptiani, Turkish, Vlach and Serb - who do not constitute 20% of any regional population. The agreement is primarily focussed on ensuring the social, economic and cultural rights of minorities who comprise more than 20% of a local community, enabling them, for example, to use their own language at an official level and enabling its use at all levels of the education system.

The parliament now has until the end of October to begin introducing legislation to implement certain provisions of the agreement. However, the process may be derailed should problems arise in the course of the weapons collections programme conducted by NATO, and in the related amnesty offered by President Trajkovski to NLA members who disarm voluntarily. Amnesty International

reminds the government that "amnesties for human rights abuses are inconsistent with international law and the state's duty to bring to justice those responsible for such abuses".

Given the organization's previous concerns about arbitrary arrests and detentions, and torture and ill-treatment, Amnesty International is also concerned by recent statements from the Interior Minister Ljube Boskovski, reported in the Macedonian media, promising a 'crackdown on the rebels' as soon as NATO troops deployed in Operation Essential Harvest leave the country.

Finally, despite statements by the authorities promising redress for human rights abuses and crimes committed during the recent period of conflict, no plans have as yet been made public as to how this process will be implemented. "The Macedonian Government should ensure that investigations into alleged abuses carried out by all parties to the conflict are conducted promptly and impartially, with respect for the rights of detainees, and that proceedings are carried out in compliance with international standards for fair trials," Amnesty International concluded.

Background

The Ohrid Agreement was signed on 13 August by leaders of the Macedonian and Albanian political parties which comprise the coalition Government of National Unity, following an international diplomatic initiative to save the country from civil war.

Recent reports in the domestic media have indicated a wide range of attitudes towards the Agreement. The Albanian media is largely in favour of the Agreement, but shows concern over its implementation and the withdrawal of NATO. The Macedonian media is divided between those who favour the Agreement, and supporters of hardline nationalists such as Prime Minister Georgievski and Interior Minister Ljube Boskovski who regard it as a betrayal of the Macedonian state and people.

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