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Serbia and Montenegro: Stop attacks on human rights activists

Human rights activists and independent journalists in Serbia are increasingly threatened and even physically attacked in an attempt to silence debate about past atrocities, Amnesty International said today in a new report. Their premises are covered with offensive graffiti and they are threatened with legal action or the opening of what appear to be malicious prosecutions.

"These attacks are startlingly reminiscent of the clampdown on human rights activists, journalists and opposition activists which dogged the final days of the presidency of Slobodan Milosevic," said Sian Jones, Amnesty International's researcher on Serbia and Montenegro.

In its latest report *Serbia and Montenegro, The writing on the wall: Serbian human rights defenders at risk*, Amnesty International documents threats reportedly made not only by private individuals, but by members of the security forces, and members of the government or political parties in coalition with the government. Although the perpetrators of the majority of the incidents remain unknown, it is reasonably suspected that they are linked to right-wing nationalist groups.

The report highlights the fact that most of the human rights activists targeted are engaged in a programme which aims to challenge the continuing climate of impunity for war crimes and to encourage both the Serbian authorities and public to acknowledge the truth about the past, focussing in particular on the 10th anniversary of the massacre at Srebrenica during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

On accession to the Council of Europe, Serbia and Montenegro agreed to undertake a number of commitments including "to inform the people of Serbia about the crimes committed by the regime of Slobodan Milosevic, not only against the other peoples of the region but also against the Serbs". However, following the showing on national television of a video of the killing of six Bosniaks from Srebrenica by members of a Serbian paramilitary formation, representatives of several political parties, including some in coalition with the present government, accused the human rights activists of conducting an anti-Serbian campaign.

Several times in the past year, anti-Semitic graffiti was sprayed on the building of the Humanitarian Law Centre in Belgrade, including reference to the director Natasa Kandic as a "Jewish pawn". The director of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights Sonja Biserko was physically attacked on several occasions and her apartment broken into. She was accused by a Belgrade tabloid of being a Croatian spy. A women's organization opposed to Serbia's involvement in the Balkan wars, *Zene u crnom*, (Women in

Black) was subjected to a criminal investigation on suspicion of involvement in organized prostitution, allegations which Amnesty International considers transparently unfounded.

Journalists have also been harassed and intimidated, including a reporter and the editor of the independent Belgrade daily newspaper, *Danas*. The independent radio, television and internet site *B92*, and its Director and Editor in Chief Veran Matic were abused following the showing of the video of the killing of the six Bosniaks. In Vranje in southern Serbia, Sasa Stojkovic of *Radio OK*, was allegedly threatened with physical violence by members of the Serbian Radical Party.

"These attacks are going unchallenged because the authorities lack the political will to address impunity for war crimes. At the same time the army and police are interested in preserving impunity while the judiciary is weak and politically influenced," Sian Jones said.

"Impunity is further strengthened by the failure of the authorities to bring to justice people suspected of threats and attacks against human rights activists or journalists, even where there is evidence to suggest that attacks are motivated by, or intend to incite, national, ethnic or religious discrimination. Indeed, members of the Serbian government have, in some cases, merely reinforced the climate of impunity for such attacks."

Amnesty International calls on the authorities to conduct prompt, thorough and impartial investigations into all such allegations, and to ensure that the principles contained in the *UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders* are fully incorporated into national law and mechanisms.

Amnesty International calls on the international community, and in particular the member states of both the Council of Europe and the European Union, to raise the organization's concerns on human rights defenders in all relevant bilateral and multilateral meetings with Serbian authorities.

See: *Serbia and Montenegro: The writing on the wall, Serbian human rights defenders at risk*, (AI Index: EUR: 70/016/2005) <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engneur700162005>

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