

EXTERNAL

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EXTRA 16/97

Fear of ill-treatment / Prisoners
of conscience / Possible POCs

6 February 1997

ALBANIA Vladimir Goxhi, Arben Gega, Stavri Shkëmbi, Gjergji Meta, Ermir
Çaçi (18), B. Memushi, Roland Beqiraj, journalist

Mass demonstrations are continuing for a second day in the southern town of Vlora, the latest in a wave of protests throughout Albania by people demanding the return of money invested in fraudulent pyramid investment schemes, in which many families have lost their life savings. Amnesty International fears that the current unrest may lead to further human rights violations such as accompanied similar protests in January this year, including police violence against non-violent demonstrators, the ill-treatment of detained demonstrators and the detention of prisoners of conscience and possible prisoners of conscience.

The demonstrations in Vlora on 5 February (there were similar protests there on at least two occasions in January) appear to have started peacefully, but violent clashes reportedly broke out after police intervened to prevent demonstrators from marching through the main street. At least 30 of protesters are reported to have been arrested, and at least 10 people injured, including three police officers. Angry crowds were reported to have gathered on 6 February outside the police station demanding the release of those arrested.

Following demonstrations in Vlora on 16 January, there were reports that police had arrested and ill-treated demonstrators. One of those arrested, B. Memushi, alleged that he had been detained for 30 hours and had been beaten by police with a truncheon and a chair leg, as a result of which he had broken teeth and injuries to his genitals. He denied that he had taken part in the demonstrations.

In January, protests in a number of towns escalated into violent riots in the course of which government and court buildings and police stations were burned down. Many people, including some 200 police officers, are reported to have been injured. According to official sources some 150 demonstrators were arrested - other sources claim the figures are far higher and that in some cases arrests have been arbitrary and carried out with great violence. A number of opposition leaders have been arrested and/or charged with organizing the protests; other people have been arrested and charged with perpetrating or inciting acts of violence against public property.

In Berat, where angry protesters on 25 January set fire to offices of the town hall, the prosecutor's office and the court, it is alleged that over 200 people were arrested; some 30 have since reportedly been released and many of these have allegedly sought medical treatment for injuries they received in police custody, including Vladimir Goxhi, Arben Gega, Stavri Shkëmbi and Gjergji Meta who were reportedly admitted to hospital. It is reported that after the demonstrations police were seen beating detainees in the courtyard of the police station in Berat. Relatives have complained that they have been denied access to detainees or even information as to their whereabouts. The parents of Ermir Çaçi, arrested in Berat on 26 January, reportedly deny that he took part in the protests and say that they were not informed until 30 January that he was being detained in Tirana.

On 5 February, the independent newspaper *Koha Jonë* (Our Time) reported that local correspondent Roland Beqiraj, who had reported on demonstrations in Korça on 28 January, had been arrested, beaten and injured by police the following day. After being admitted to the military hospital in Tirana, he was subsequently returned to Korça where he remains in detention. He is reportedly charged with taking part in the demonstrations which had not been officially authorized, although it appears that he had simply been present in his capacity as a journalist. Amnesty International believes Roland Beqiraj to be a prisoner of conscience.

In Tirana, a number of opposition party leaders, among them Rexhep Mejdani, Skënder Gjinushi and Arben Imami, have been charged with organizing an illegal demonstration on 19 January. Eduard Alushi, a Socialist Party official in Vlora, has reportedly been placed under house-arrest on suspicion that he organized demonstrations in the town on 26 January, when protesters set fire to town hall offices; charges have also been brought against opposition officials in the towns of Korça and Peshkopi.

In mid-January the Albanian Helsinki Committee, a local human rights organization, publicly protested that the Procurator General had failed to approve the Committee's request to visit police stations in order to monitor the treatment of detainees.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in Italian, English, French or German or your own language:

- recognizing the duty of the authorities to maintain law and order, and stating that AI does not condone the use of violence by demonstrators;
- urging, however, that the authorities maintain law and order in a manner that conforms with their international human rights undertakings;
- expressing concern about allegations that police have ill-treated detained protesters (cite cases) and urging that instructions be urgently given to police in all districts to desist from violence against detainees;
- urging the release of anyone detained as the result of their non-violent exercise of the right to freedom of assembly or freedom of expression, citing in particular the case of Roland Beqiraj;

if possible, also:

- note reports that a number of opposition officials and others have been arrested and/or charged in connection with the demonstrations and urging that their cases be urgently reviewed and that charges be dropped against any persons who did not use or incite violence, and that any others be granted a fair trial in accordance with international standards.

APPEALS TO:

President of Albania

Dr Sali Berisha

Presidenti i Republikës së Shqipërisë

Zyra e Presidencës, Tirana

Republic of Albania

Fax: +355 42 33761 or 355 42 28 420 (Fax/Tel)

Telegrams: President, Tirana, Albania

Salutation: Dear President

Minister of Public Order

Mr Halit Shamata

Minister i Rendit Publik, Tirana,
Republic of Albania

Telegrams: Minister i Rendit Publik, Tirana, Republic of Albania

Fax: +355 42 63607 (direct)

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

The Albanian Helsinki Committee

Komiteti Shqiptar i Helsinkit
Rr Ali Demi, Pall 2, Shk 2, ap 12,
Tirana, Republic of Albania

and to diplomatic representatives of ALBANIA accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat,
or your section office, if sending appeals after 7 March 1997.