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ALBANIA: GOVERNMENT CANNOT PICK AND CHOOSE WHO IS ENTITLED TO HUMAN RIGHTS

In a letter to President Sali Berisha, Amnesty International called on his government to live up to its public statements in support of human rights in Albania, and ensure that these apply to all its citizens.

“While we recognize that Albania has achieved many human rights reforms since 1990, there has still not been a resolute break with past practices,” Amnesty International said.

“President Berisha and his supporters have repeatedly -- and rightly -- denounced the gross human rights violations committed under communist rule. However, these denunciations lose credibility when made by those who themselves commit human rights violations.”

Hundreds of opposition activists were arrested briefly and many ill-treated in connection with elections in May 1996. Amnesty International believes that many people were detained simply for being members of an opposition party, or expressing their political opinions aloud -- despite Albania's commitments to protecting these rights.

“Human rights, if they are to have any substance, must be granted equally to those whose views may be deeply repugnant to the ruling party and its supporters,” the organization said.

On 25 June, a court in Tirana charged 10 opposition supporters with taking part in a demonstration on 28 May in Tirana in protest against election fraud. If convicted they face heavy fines or up to three months' imprisonment. By contrast, it appears that no charges have been brought against police officers who severely beat opposition leaders and supporters arrested during the demonstration.

The police also arrested several journalists covering the demonstration. One of these, Bardhok Lala, was arrested by plainclothes police and taken to a lake outside Tirana. At the lake, police officers allegedly stripped him, beat him with truncheons and then fired several shots over his head after threatening to kill him.

Since then, seven police officers have reportedly been dismissed from service for “incompetence” and the Prosecutor's office is said to be investigating these incidents. However, Amnesty International is concerned that in the past such investigations were often unduly prolonged and inconclusive and called on the authorities to carry out the investigation promptly and impartially, and make its findings public.

BACKGROUND

Some 40 people, almost all of them former senior communist officials, are currently under investigation, on trial, or convicted on charges of “genocide” and “crimes against humanity” in connection with human rights abuses committed during the years of communist rule. Amnesty

International does not contest the right of the Albanian authorities to bring to justice persons who in the past committed acts recognized as grave human rights violations under international law. The organization is stressing, however, that any investigation of such grave charges must be conducted in strict accordance with international standards for fair trials.

The organization is concerned about Idajet Beqiri, leader of the opposition *Unikomb* party, who is among those currently being investigated on these charges. Unlike most others, he had not held high party or government posts in the past. Amnesty International has received reports indicating that he has been denied a fair trial, and that the charges against him might be unfounded and politically motivated -- if so, he would be a prisoner of conscience. It called for an urgent review of his case and his release, if it is found that he has been imprisoned solely for his non-violent political beliefs, or else for him to be given a prompt and fair trial.

Amnesty International also reiterated its call for the release of Fatos Nano, the main opposition Socialist Party leader, who has been in prison since July 1993. The organization believes that the charges against him of embezzlement and falsification of documents were not proved by evidence produced in court and were politically motivated.

In addition, the organization called for the release of seven men detained in 1995 and 1996 for activities allegedly indicating their support for, or their wish to "recreate", the former Albanian communist party. Two of these, Sulejman Mekollari and Lirim Veliu from Saranda, are serving sentences of four and two years' imprisonment respectively on charges of "anti-constitutional activities" -- they had distributed leaflets carrying the slogan: "America out of Albania".

Amnesty International called on President Berisha to ensure that Albania upholds its commitment made in June 1995 to the Council of Europe to end executions immediately. It urged that all death sentences imposed since then -- including the most recent on 24 May 1996 on Aranit Çela, Rrapi Mino and Zylyftar Ramizi, three former communist officials convicted of crimes against humanity -- be commuted. The organization also called on the government to uphold its commitment to abolish the death penalty.

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