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Public Statement

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Serbia and Montenegro: Sjeverin war crimes verdict in Belgrade -- Amnesty International calls for all those responsible for the policy of abductions and murders to be brought to justice

Amnesty International welcomed the conviction, on 29 September in Belgrade, of four men for the abduction and subsequent murder of 16 Muslims from Sjeverin in Serbia and Montenegro (SCG) taken from a bus at Mioce in Bosnia-Herzegovina in October 1992. However, the organization is calling for a new investigation to be opened in order to bring to justice those involved in planning and sanctioning this and other similar war crimes against the civilian population.

Four Bosnian Serbs, Milan Lukic, Oliver Krsmanovic and Dragutin Dragicevic were sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment, while Djordje Sevic was sentenced to 15 years after being found guilty of kidnapping, torturing and murdering the victims. During the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina the four convicted men had been members of a Serb paramilitary organization led by Milan Lukic and operating in the border areas between SCG and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

"Despite Monday's verdict, Amnesty International believes that justice will not be done until all those responsible for this and other such abductions are brought to justice," the organization declared.

Sabrija Hodzic, whose son was among the kidnapped, welcomed the sentence but warned that "those who are the most responsible for this crime have remained free...They have sentenced the executioners, but not those who gave the orders."

Previously, on 9 September 2002 at Bijelo Polje court in Montenegro, Nebojsa Ranisavljevic, another member of Milan Lukic's paramilitary organization, was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment for "war crimes against the civilian population" for his part in the hijacking of the Belgrade-Bar train at Strpci in Bosnia-Herzegovina on 27 February 1993, and the abduction and subsequent murder of 20 civilian passengers -- 19 Muslims and one ethnic Croat. At this trial in Montenegro, evidence produced in court again heavily implicated Milan Lukic. Documents from the state railway company also clearly demonstrated the complicity of former political and military authorities in planning such abductions.

In the recent trial, the first war crimes trial of Serbs to finish in the first instance in Belgrade, both Milan Lukic and Oliver Krsmanovic were tried *in absentia* and remained at large. However, after the trial had begun, Oliver Krsmanovic was reported by the Serbian and Bosnian media to be living openly at his home in Visegrad in the Republika Srpska (RS) in Bosnia-Herzegovina. No apparent attempt to arrest him was made, either by the RS authorities or by SFOR -- the NATO-led Stabilization Force stationed in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Belgrade court "irrefutably established" that Milan Lukic and his group had kidnapped the Muslims, citizens of Serbia from Sjeverin in the Sandzak region, and had taken the victims to the Bosnian Serb-run town of Visegrad and "tortured them there, mistreated them and then brought them to the bank of the Drina river and killed them". The remains of the victims have never been found.

Amnesty International is calling for the arrest of Milan Lukic and Oliver Krsmanovic and others allegedly responsible for the abductions and murders.

Amnesty International remains extremely concerned that the SCG, Serbian and RS governments have made so little progress in tackling impunity for war crimes committed under, and with the knowledge of the previous Milosevic government. Amnesty International urges as a matter of priority that the SCG and RS authorities establish genuine and effective cooperation to fully resolve this and other cases of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Amnesty International believes that, in order to create the conditions for respect and protection of human rights in the SCG and the region generally, it is imperative that all those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity in the 1990s in connection with the armed conflicts following the break-up of former Yugoslavia, be brought to justice, and all victims of these crimes receive just reparation.

Amnesty International also considers that the suffering of the relatives of the Sjeverin victims, in their attempts to establish what happened to their family members, amounts to a violation of their right to freedom from torture and ill-treatment, and urges the SCG authorities to provide appropriate compensation for the relatives of the abducted.

Background

On 27 February 1993, a train travelling from Belgrade to the Montenegrin port of Bar entered a 10-kilometre section of track in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in territory controlled by the Bosnian Serbs. At Strpci station the train was stopped and boarded by armed men in uniform, some of whom were thought by witnesses to be Bosnian Serb or military police. The men went through the train asking for identity papers, from which they could deduce the nationality of most of the passengers. They took 20 or more men off the train. Most were Muslims from Montenegro, but one was a Croat, a retired Yugoslav National Army officer.

In the previous year, on 22 October 1992, another group of Muslims was abducted - allegedly by the same paramilitary group - from a bus at Mioce - again in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Several other abductions are believed to have taken place in the Sandzak region during the same period, which also saw a systematic practice of ill-treatment by police, and attacks on life and property by paramilitary groups in an attempt to intimidate the local Muslim population.

Both the abductions at Strpci and Mioce are believed to have been carried out by same the paramilitary unit based in Visegrad in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and lead by Milan Lukic. Milan Lukic was secretly indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia on 12 October 1998 - (the indictment was made public on 30 October 2000) - in connection with crimes in Visegrad during this period.

According to court indictments in the spring of 1992, Milan Lukic had formed a group of paramilitaries which worked with local police and military units in exacting a reign of terror upon the local Muslim population. His cousin, Sredoje Lukic, and Mitar Vasiljevic are also alleged to have been members of this group, which between May 1992 and October 1994, is alleged to have committed a multitude of crimes in the Visegrad municipality including murder, torture, assault, looting and the destruction of property. Amnesty International has also taken up cases of alleged rape and "disappearance" of young Bosnian women, at the Vilina Vlas hotel in Visegrad, in which Milan Lukic was allegedly involved.

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