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Serbia: Police spokesperson's call for attack on Women in Black underscores urgent need to address culture of impunity

The call by anti-terrorism police spokesperson, Radomir Počuča, for football fans to unite and fight against the non-governmental organization, Women in Black (*Žene u crnom*) highlights the urgent need for the Serbian government to demonstrate the political will to address the ongoing impunity for crimes committed in the Kosovo conflict.

The statement was posted on Radomir Počuča's personal Facebook page, the day before a silent vigil by Women in Black on 26 March to commemorate the anniversary of the start of the international armed conflict in Serbia and Kosovo in 1999.

Standing in Trg Republike in the centre of Belgrade, the group displayed a banner which stated "We Are Remembering the Crimes". Individual women and men held placards with the names of places in Kosovo where ethnic Albanian civilians were killed or disappeared, including Čuška, Trnje, Izbica, Bela Crkva, Meja, Suva Reka, Dubrava and Račak.

Amnesty International welcomes this morning's statement from the Ministry of Interior police, condemning Radomir Počuča's remarks, which were subsequently taken down from his Facebook profile page. The Ministry of Interior initially stated that the spokesperson's contract, with two months to run, was not likely to be renewed; later media reports suggest that he will be subject to a disciplinary procedure. Amnesty International calls for Radomir Počuča to be suspended from his role as spokesperson, pending the disciplinary inquiry and consideration of criminal charges. Staša Žajović, for Women in Black, has already stated that the group will lodge criminal charges.

Amnesty International calls on Aleksandar Vučić, currently the Deputy Prime Minister, to publicly condemn Radomir Počuča's statement, and to instruct the Ministry of Interior to ensure that all police officers and officials are made aware of Serbia's international obligations to investigate all persons reasonably suspected of crimes under international law. Serbia also has the obligation to protect human rights defenders, including Women in Black, who have previously been subject to threats and physical attacks.

Amnesty International further notes that prosecutions have already been concluded, at the first instance, in proceedings at the Special War Crimes Court in Belgrade for war crimes against the civilian population in Čuška and Suva Reka, and an indictment was recently opened for war crimes against civilians in Trnje.

Several former Ministry of Interior police have already been convicted and sentenced for war crimes against the civilian population in Kosovo. The rate of prosecutions remains slow, including because of obstruction, including the intimidation of witnesses, by both serving and former

members of the Ministry of Interior police force active in Kosovo. Senior police and military officers have not been indicted for their command responsibility.

The investigation of some cases has also allegedly been hampered by the fact that relatively junior officers within the War Crimes Investigation Service, a department in the Ministry of Interior police, are required to investigate senior officers, within the same ministry, who are suspected of war crimes. Further, allegations have been made by some protected witnesses in war crimes trials related to Kosovo that they and their families have been threatened by members of the Witness Protection Unit, composed of Ministry of Interior Police, with the aim of intimidating them into withdrawing their statements.

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