

PUBLIC



AI Index: EUR 64/004/99

Action Ref.: EERAN 11/99

Date: 23 August 1999

Croatia:

Fear for safety: violent attacks against Serbs in eastern Slavonia

Amnesty International's concern

Amnesty International is concerned about the safety of the declining Croatian Serb population in some villages in eastern Slavonia, a region in the northeastern part of the country which used to be home to a large Serb minority. Within the past four months two killings of local Serbs and dozens of other violent incidents were reported in the Vukovar area, which clearly had the aim of intimidating the remaining Serbs into leaving the region. Police investigations were opened almost immediately following the killings, and in both cases a suspect was arrested. However Amnesty International remains concerned that local and national authorities have not acted decisively to prevent the violence from escalating.

Amnesty International urges the Croatian authorities to thoroughly and impartially investigate these and other events and to bring to justice those thought to be responsible. The organization also recommends that the local authorities, in the light of the recent violence do everything in their power to provide comprehensive and effective protection for the remaining Serb population in villages where the situation is tense.

Amnesty International recognizes the difficulties facing the local police, especially in the context of emotionally and politically charged returns of displaced persons and refugees (many of whom are still traumatized by the suffering caused by the war in eastern Slavonia) and the public opening of mass graves. Therefore the organization urges the national and local authorities in Croatia to provide sufficient resources and adequate training, including human rights training, to enable the police to carry out their duties.

Background

In the early evening of 9 August Djuro Mutif, a 39-year-old Serb, was beaten to death in the village of Berak, some 10 kilometres south of Vukovar. According to reports in the Croatian press¹, he had

¹The Croatian weekly *Nacional* of 18 August 1999, dailies *Jutarnji List* of 12 August 1999 and *Vjesnik* of 13 August 1999.

been ill that day and had not left his house. The street he lived in was a particularly quiet one as most of the nearby houses belonged to Serbs who had recently left the village. At around 8pm some of Djuro Mutif's neighbours heard noise coming from his house, indicating that a fight was going on and screams for help. They rang the local police who arrived after another 20 to 30 minutes and found the dead body of Djuro Mutif lying in a pool of blood in his courtyard.

The police immediately arrested a Croat man, DM², who had recently returned to the village and who had been seen on the street walking away from the victim's house towards his own which was situated nearby. Blood was found on the doorstep of the house where the suspect lived with his mother. The Vukovar County investigating judge is reportedly conducting an investigation against this suspect, who has not yet been charged. Djuro Mutif's neighbours have claimed that they saw a group of four to five men leaving the scene, and that the amount of damage to his house clearly indicated that the attack on Djuro Mutif was carried out by more than one person. To Amnesty International's knowledge however, the police have not arrested any other suspects.

Before the war, the village of Berak had a population of some 1,000 inhabitants, the majority of whom were Croats, although there was a significant Serb minority. Tensions in the village arose with the return of the village's pre-war Croat inhabitants which got under way in the first half of 1999. At the time many Serbs, who originated from eastern Slavonia or who had fled there during the armed conflict, were departing from the region, mostly heading for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) air campaign against FRY caused a temporary stagnation in this outflow and even reversed it to some extent.

The situation in Berak is in particular complicated by the fact that there is a relatively large number of Croat inhabitants - around 30 - still unaccounted for who are presumed to have been killed by Serbian forces during the armed conflict. A number of bodies were exhumed from mass graves in the village but not all of them have yet been recovered. The relatives of the missing, who are returning to the village after years of internal displacement, reportedly focussed their frustration and anger on the remaining Serb villagers and demanded from them information about the location of further mass graves and the names of those responsible for the killings. Since early May, incessant protests were held in the village, one of which resulted in the virtual siege of the house of a remaining Serb couple, who had apparently been subjected to threats and intimidation before. The couple claimed further in an interview with the Croatian weekly *Feral Tribune* of 24 May 1999 that the mayor of Tompojevci (the municipality which includes Berak) had on several occasions personally intimidated them and told them that all Serbs should leave the village. The woman had also been attacked by the brother-in-law of the mayor on the day the protests started.

Following Djuro Mutif's murder, on 11 August a spokesman for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) expressed the organization's concern about a pattern of intimidation and violence occurring in Berak and other villages where Serbs were in a small minority³. The OSCE called upon the police to act decisively, and to bring to justice all those responsible for the killing. At the same time, a Western diplomat stated that DM had apparently been implicated in some previous incidents in Berak but had never been criminally prosecuted for these.

The murder in Berak was preceded by a somewhat similar violent incident in Marinci village which is situated between Vukovar and Vinkovci. In the late afternoon of 16 May 1999, a local Serb

²The name of this person is known to Amnesty International.

³*Reuters*, 11 August 1999.

villager, 59-year-old Teodor Bogdanović, was reportedly shot and killed by PP⁴, a Croat from Kosovo. PP immediately after the killing turned himself in to the police. According to the police, the killing was motivated by revenge as PP's father and brother had been killed during the war in Croatia. PP has since been released from custody awaiting the outcome of the investigation of the County investigating judge.

At the end of May, the local branch of the Croatian Helsinki Committee, the country's largest human rights organization, expressed concern about increasing attacks on the Serb population in eastern Slavonia, in particular in the Vukovar area. The organization said that in May alone some 20 violent incidents of this kind had been registered, most of them involving the throwing of explosive devices at Serb houses and physical assaults. They also claimed that the attacks had been reported to the local police, who failed to take appropriate action.

⁴The name of this person is known to Amnesty International.