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Serbian "Isolation" of Albanian Prisoners Attacked

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EAST SERBIAN "ISOLATION" OF ALBANIAN PRISONERS ATTACKED

Munich, 21 July (RAD/David Goodlett)

Summary: *The Serbian policy of holding Albanian prisoners without filing charges against them and under conditions that often appear to involve use of torture has come under attack.*

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In recent weeks opposition to Serbia's "isolation" policy has intensified. This policy allows the police to confine indefinitely individuals who have not been charged with a crime; the prisoners can be kept in a prison or elsewhere and are apparently subjected to appalling conditions and inhuman treatment, including torture. The policy was used extensively in March during the Serbian crackdown in the province of Kosovo, which had enjoyed constitutionally guaranteed autonomy from the republic of Serbia since 1974. The Albanians often appear to have been taken from Kosovo to jails in Serbia proper for their "isolation," and the brutality shown them was vividly described by a greengrocer who survived the ordeal and was eventually freed.

Although "isolation" is permitted under the Yugoslav criminal code, it has been used only rarely, mostly during the riots in Kosovo in 1981. In anticipation, however, of amendments proposed to the Yugoslav Constitution that were aimed at reasserting Serbian supremacy over the province, Albanian miners in Kosovo began a series of strikes and demonstrations in November 1988. The display of Albanian anger over the loss of autonomy helped to fuel Serbian nationalism, which was carefully encouraged by the Serbian political leadership under Slobodan Milosevic and the media under his control. Milosevic promised in February that the leaders of the protests would be arrested.

After the amendments were finally ratified in late March, the strikes turned to riots. At least 24 people were killed in the ensuing violence between Albanian protesters and the police and federal militia. The Serbian police authorities, in line with Milosevic's pronouncement, set out to capture not only those who had participated in the violence but also anyone suspected of "Albanian nationalism and separatism." The authorities seem to have made wholesale arrests, which included Azem Vllasi, who had been head of the Kosovo provincial communist party until April 1988. Vllasi was subsequently charged with "counterrevolution," a crime theoretically punishable by death. In addition, approximately 240 Albanian nationalist intellectuals, writers, and businessmen were placed in "isolation," sometimes merely for advocating opposition to Serbian control of Kosovo or even for simply feeding the strikers and demonstrators.

Protests Emerge. Opposition to this confinement tactic soon began to emerge. On April 3 the Kosovo Human Rights Committee somewhat predictably criticized the trials of the Albanian

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demonstrators. On April 18 the Slovene PEN Center accused Serbian and other Yugoslav authorities of violating the rights of Yugoslav writers and intellectuals; they singled out Kosovo Albanians as victims. As part of a general criticism of laws that are used to restrict Yugoslav political activity, the Belgrade-based Yugoslav Human Rights Forum on May 11 questioned the policy of isolation.

The tone of the criticism sharpened in June. The Zagreb daily *Vjesnik* of June 11 published a scathing account of the arrest and confinement of one of the victims of "isolation," the greengrocer charged with giving food to striking Albanian miners. On June 22 the Serbian Writers' Association, an organization that had frequently supported both Milosevic and Serbian nationalist arguments, denounced "isolation" in an open letter to the Belgrade daily *Borba*. This was the first public criticism of the policy to appear in a major publication within Serbia itself. Two days later Zivko Gruden, a writer for *Vjesnik*, added his voice to the growing chorus of criticism; and on June 26 *Vjesnik* printed another attack.

Throughout this period domestic criticism has been buttressed by denunciations from abroad. In mid-May, for instance, Helsinki Watch denounced the "isolation" measures against Kosovo Albanians. Amnesty International condemned the policy. Both the European Parliament and the United States House of Representatives have passed nonbinding resolutions critical of human rights abuses in Yugoslavia and specifically the treatment of Kosovo Albanians.

Since the crackdown in Kosovo, the Serbian authorities have maintained that the police tactics were effective preventive detention and were constitutional; that criticism from abroad amounted to unjustified interference in Yugoslav affairs and was unfair, given Yugoslavia's excellent human rights record; and, more recently, that the issue was irrelevant because all prisoners in "isolation" had been released. On July 17 Kosovo's Minister of Internal Affairs Jusuf Karakusi claimed that there are no more such prisoners.

New Revelations To Come? Most critics are unconvinced by such statements. On July 18, for instance, Yugoslavia's official writers' union attacked the policy of "isolation." Indicating, perhaps, that the leadership is sensitive about the subject, the Yugoslav news agency, Tanjug, reported on July 19 that the authorities in the Serbian city of Leskovac were investigating 12 prison staff members for use of force against Albanians interned there in late March. This action, whatever its intent, is scarcely likely to dampen the criticism.

The Serbian authorities no doubt find this attention embarrassing. The opponents of "isolation" and of other practices directed against the Kosovo Albanians are equally determined to press their point. This struggle reached a peak

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of sorts with the discovery made by Borba on July 14 and published the next day that Azem Vllasi plans to request that five major political figures testify at his trial scheduled for this autumn. The best-known name among the five is Slobodan Milosevic, with whom Vllasi had a long, private conversation shortly before his arrest. The prospect of such a confrontation heightens both the drama of the controversy over Kosovo and its potential stakes.

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