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Amnesty International calls for restraint on all sides after attacks in Kosovo and reprisals in Serbia

Amnesty International is deeply concerned about the situation in the UN-administered province of Kosovo where reportedly over 20 people have died and hundreds been injured including members of the security forces as a result of violent clashes between Albanians and Serbs which began on 17 March in Mitrovica/Mitrovicë and quickly spread throughout Kosovo. As well as the dead and injured there have been a number of reported attacks on Serb property and churches. Many Serbs living in small enclaves scattered throughout Kosovo have been forced to flee or been evacuated by KFOR (the international military force in Kosovo) troops. Amnesty International is also seriously concerned at reports of attacks by Serbs on mosques in Belgrade, Niš, and other cities in Serbia in response to the violence in Kosovo. The organization calls on all sides to show restraint and urges the authorities in Kosovo and Serbia to take the necessary steps to restore law and order while abiding by international standards on the use of force.

The violence erupted after reports that three Albanian children had drowned after four of them had jumped into the river Ibar near the northern town of Mitrovica/Mitrovicë on 16 March. The fourth boy who had survived claimed that they had been attacked by Serbs and jumped into the river to escape. This incident followed on from one the day before in Caglavica/Çagllavicë near the capital Priština/Prishtinë in which an 18-year-old Serb was seriously injured in a drive-by shooting, believed to have been perpetrated by Albanians, resulting in road-blocks by Serbs in protests.

Following reports of the drowning of the three boys, large crowds of Albanians and Serbs gathered on 17 March in Mitrovica/Mitrovicë – which has been the scene of violent inter-ethnic clashes in the past - at the river Ibar which divides the town between the predominantly Serbian north and Albanian south. Armed violence broke out, including grenades thrown at KFOR soldiers, and reportedly seven people were killed and hundreds wounded. The wounded included 11 French KFOR troops attempting to keep order reportedly by using rubber bullets and stun-grenades. The situation appeared to have calmed by the evening of 17 March with a curfew of 7pm local time imposed on the town.

In the meantime the violence had spread to a number of places throughout Kosovo, including Uroševac/Ferizaj, Prizren and the capital Priština/Prishtinë. In Belo Polje/Bellopojë near Pec/Pejë a number of houses belonging to Serbs, who had returned after fleeing the province in 1999, were reportedly torched by Albanians, while in Prizren the Orthodox seminary was burned. The UN has reported that the Orthodox church in Obilic/Obliq was set on fire. In the capital Priština/Prishtinë hundreds of Serbs were reportedly evacuated by KFOR and one person was reportedly killed in the predominantly Serbian Yu-building near the centre of the city.

On 18 March a joint statement by the Provisional Institution of Self-Government, Kosovo political leaders, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General, the European Union presidency and the QUINT (a body comprising five major western powers) called for the violence to stop, and stated that police investigations to identify and locate the perpetrators were being conducted. NATO confirmed that it was to send extra troops to supplement the 17,000 KFOR members already

stationed there, and it was reported that the NATO chief had given KFOR commanders the authority to use proportional force necessary to ensure their safety, protect the innocent people of Kosovo and re-establish freedom of movement throughout Kosovo.

Amnesty International urges KFOR and UNMIK police that, in accordance with international standards, law enforcement officials and troops be instructed to use firearms only if other means remain ineffective, or without any promise of achieving the intended result, and reiterates that the standards underscore that law enforcement officials may resort to the intentional lethal use of firearms *only* when strictly unavoidable to protect life.

Background

The continuing uncertainty over the question of the 'final status' of Kosovo - which since July 1999 has remained under the control of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) - has contributed to inter-ethnic tensions which have risen in the last year. In January 2003 KFOR reversed the decision taken in late 2002 to remove protection from Orthodox churches and monasteries against attacks by ethnic Albanians. In June 2003 a Serb family, 80-year-old Slobodan Stolic, his 78-year-old wife Radmila and 55-year-old son Ljubinko were brutally murdered in Obilic/Obiliq and their house burnt in what was seen as a racist attack to intimidate remaining Serbs into leaving the area. In June 2003 KFOR announced that the security situation in Uroševac/Ferizaj had deteriorated with arson attacks on minority properties and an explosion in the yard of an Orthodox church. On 13 August, the day the new Special Representative of the Secretary General, Harri Holkeri, arrived in Kosovo, a gun attack on a swimming party in the Serb enclave of Goraždevac/Gorazhdvec near Pec/Pejë killed two Serb youths and wounded several others. Grenade attacks on houses are reported, and the stoning of vehicles, perceived as belonging to minorities, are widespread.

Amnesty International believes that the recurrence of ethnic violence in Kosovo underscores the failure of the UNMIK as well as the authorities in Serbia and Montenegro to seriously address the legacy of human rights violations and abuses in Kosovo, including in particular the continuing impunity for the perpetrators of inter-ethnic violence, and a continuing failure to resolve the fate of those who "disappeared" and were abducted during, and following, the conflict in 1999. Amnesty International remains extremely concerned at the lack of progress made in the last four years by the Serbian authorities in bringing to justice those suspected of the "disappearance" of thousands ethnic Albanians in Kosovo when the province was administered by Serbia. The organization is also extremely concerned at the lack of progress by the Kosovo authorities in bringing to justice those responsible for the abduction of some 1,200 Serbs, Roma and members of other minority communities (see: *Amnesty International, Serbia and Montenegro (Kosovo/Kosova) "Prisoners in our homes": Amnesty International's concerns for the human rights of minorities in Kosovo/Kosova*, AI Index: EUR 70/010/2003)