



Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	57
Land:	Makedonien
Kilde:	Amnesty International
Titel:	"Amnesty International Report"
Udgivet:	25. maj 2005
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	11. januar 2006

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Amnesty International

Macedonia

Covering events from January - December 2004

There was an improvement in the human rights situation, although there were continuing allegations of ill-treatment by security officials. The trafficking of women and girls for forced prostitution continued, although some perpetrators were arrested and convicted. Domestic violence against women remained widespread but prosecutions were rare. Senior former officials were arrested and charged in connection with the extrajudicial execution of seven immigrants in 2002.



Macedonia

Background

On 26 February President Boris Trajkovski died in a plane crash in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In August parliament adopted a new regional law to reduce the previous 123 municipalities to 80. Within each municipality, minorities constituting 25 per cent or more of the population would have their language recognized as an official language. The new internal borders provoked widespread demonstrations by ethnic Macedonians who saw the new boundaries, especially those relating to Struga and the capital, Skopje, as favouring ethnic Albanians. However, in November a referendum against the new law failed due to insufficient turn-out.

In October the European Union (EU) formally opened accession talks with Macedonia. At Prime Minister Kostov's invitation, the EU extended the mandate of Proxima (the EU police force tasked with advising the country's police force) for a further 12 months from 15 December.

Unemployment and poverty levels remained high. According to official figures, some 400,000 people (out of a population of around two million according to the 2002 census) were unemployed, and more than 30 per cent of the population lived on less than US\$2.15 per day.

Members of the Romani community were especially disadvantaged, usually residing in substandard settlements lacking basic amenities and figuring disproportionately among the unemployed. Furthermore, only one in 10 Romani children completed elementary school: a precondition for registering for health and social insurance in later life. State health care for children is dependent on one parent completing elementary education.

Extrajudicial executions at Rashtanski Lozja

The authorities finally acknowledged that seven immigrants (six Pakistanis and one Indian) who were killed in March 2002 in Rashtanski Lozja had been extrajudicially executed. The authorities had previously claimed that the men were Islamic militants planning to attack western diplomatic targets in Macedonia, were connected to ethnic Albanian insurgents in the country, and that they had died after opening fire against the authorities. However, major inconsistencies in the government version pointed to extrajudicial executions. In April the authorities stated that the then Macedonian authorities had contacted the men while they were in Bulgaria, had brought them to Macedonia on false pretences, had murdered them and had planted false evidence against them.

The authorities charged a number of people with murder in connection with the killings, including three former police commanders, two special police officers and a businessman, as well as former Minister of Internal Affairs Ljube Boshkovski who fled to Croatia. He was arrested by the Croatian authorities in connection with the killings and remained in detention pending trial in Croatia.

The 'disappeared' and abducted

There was some progress in discovering the fate of 20 missing persons – 13 ethnic Macedonians, six ethnic

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

Head of state: Branko Crvenkovski (replaced Boris Trajkovski in February)

Head of government: Vlado Buchkovski (replaced Hari Kostov in November, who replaced Branko Crvenkovski in May)

Death penalty: abolitionist for all crimes

International Criminal Court: ratified

UN Women's Convention and its Optional Protocol: ratified

Further information

[Europe and Central Asia: Summary of Amnesty International's concerns in the region, January-June 2004: Macedonia](#)
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Albanians, and one Bulgarian citizen – who “disappeared” or were abducted during the 2001 conflict between security forces and the ethnic Albanian National Liberation Army. DNA analysis carried out on bodies found in 2003 in a mass grave near the village of Trebos, Tetovo, identified four of the abducted ethnic Macedonians.

In May, police in Kichevo received an unsigned letter indicating burial sites in Zheleznec, Jama and Veles, and an anonymous phone call claiming that human bodies were buried in a pit in Jama, in the Bistra mountains. The Ministry of Internal Affairs disclosed that the writer of the letter, written in Serbian, claimed that he was a police instructor who had fought against Albanian “terrorists”, and that the corpses were those of missing Albanians. Four bodies were exhumed from the site in Jama, an autopsy was ordered and relatives of the “disappeared” came forward to facilitate DNA identification. Among reports of official complicity in the “disappearances”, a police officer reportedly claimed to have seen a missing ethnic Albanian, Ruzhdi Velu, in Bitola prison after his “disappearance”.

In September the Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that an arrest warrant had been issued in connection with the abducted ethnic Macedonians but that the suspect, a former local commander of the ethnic Albanians, was in hiding. However, no indictments in connection with the “disappeared” ethnic Albanians had been issued by the end of 2004.

Prisoner of conscience Zoran Vranishkovski

On 11 January Zoran Vranishkovski, also known as Bishop or Metropolitan Jovan, was arrested along with four monks and seven nuns after holding a religious service in his private apartment. All were released after about 30 hours, but Zoran Vranishkovski was re-arrested on 12 January and charged with “causing national, racial or religious hatred, discord and intolerance” under Article 319 of the Criminal Code. He believed he was detained because he argued that the Serbian Orthodox Church should have control of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, from which he had been expelled. On 30 January he was released from custody. On 18 August he was sentenced to 18 months’ imprisonment, confirmed on appeal, but remained at liberty pending a further appeal.

Police ill-treatment

There appeared to be fewer alleged instances of police ill-treatment, although cases continued to be reported.

- In June Sashko Dragovich was allegedly beaten at Butel Police Station No. 1 in Skopje to force him to confess to theft. A medical certificate reportedly recorded injuries to his face, head and arms, inflicted by truncheon and fist. In October the Ministry of Internal Affairs informed the Macedonian Helsinki Committee that an investigation had failed to prove that the injuries had been inflicted by police, but that disciplinary proceedings would be instituted against the officer involved for other legal infractions connected to the arrest.

In March the Court of Appeal postponed for the 17th time the trial of four police inspectors who allegedly beat 12-year-old Isak Tairovski in 1994 so badly that he was permanently disabled. The hearing was postponed because one of the accused and a witness did not attend court.

Journalists punished for libel and slander

In April amendments to the Criminal Code removed the possibility of official prosecutions for slander and libel. However, private individuals could still bring cases, and slander and libel remained criminal offences carrying possible prison sentences. The Association of Journalists of Macedonia warned that this could intimidate and silence journalists. It pointed out that there were some 50 such charges each year, the majority against journalists, often initiated by officials in connection with investigative journalism.

Violence against women

Domestic violence against women remained widespread. Official figures released in November reported 98 criminal charges and 623 misdemeanour charges brought during the year for domestic violence.

Changes to the Criminal Code in April raised minimum prison sentences for human trafficking from five to eight years. Despite police raids against traffickers, prosecutions and convictions were low. Statistics for 2003 published by a daily newspaper showed that in the Tetovo region, 80 police raids on suspected brothels with trafficked women found 95 people “without regulated residence in Macedonia”. The raids resulted in 38 people being charged in connection with trafficking and forced prostitution but only one conviction. The newspaper stated that the Tetovo prosecution had difficulties in gathering evidence and that witnesses were often afraid to testify and were sometimes the subject of death threats. In December the police announced that in the previous nine months they had discovered 39 cases of trafficking involving 79 people.

Refugees and internally displaced people

About 2,400 registered internally displaced people remained after the 2001 conflict in Macedonia, of whom about half were accommodated in collective centres while the remainder were with relatives. In addition there were an estimated 1,500 refugees from Kosovo, predominantly Roma.

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