

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

Serbien og Montenegro (31)

23/3-04

Kosovo/Serbia: Protect Minorities from Ethnic Violence (358)

(New York, March 19, 2004) — NATO peacekeepers and United Nations police must make the protection of the minority communities in Kosovo the top priority in the province, Human Rights Watch said today. Ethnic violence in Kosovo has left 31 dead and as many as 500 people wounded since Wednesday.

U.N. police indicate that most of the violence is being directed at the ethnic Serb minority. Unidentified attackers have burned churches, homes, public offices and at least one school. Particularly disturbing are reports of arson attacks on newly built homes of Serbs who had recently returned to Kosovo following their forced displacement in previous years.

The attacks bear similarity to the campaign of arson, abduction, intimidation and killing directed at Serbs and Roma in the summer of 1999. This campaign of violence forced 200,000 Serbs and thousands of Roma from the province. Human Rights Watch documented the violence in an August 1999 report, "Abuses against Serbs and Roma in the New Kosovo."

"The international community's response to the attacks on Serbs and Roma in 1999 was too little, too late," said Rachel Denber, acting executive director of Human Rights Watch's Europe and Central Asia Division. "This time, NATO and the United Nations need to act urgently to protect minority communities and prevent their forced displacement."

Human Rights Watch is also concerned by violence that has flared elsewhere in Serbia after attacks began Wednesday in Kosovo. On Thursday, a Human Rights Watch researcher witnessed a crowd of hundreds of people try to force their way into the Belgrade offices of the Humanitarian Law Center, a leading human rights organization in Serbia that has documented and condemned abuses in Kosovo against Albanians and Serbs alike. Local police were notified, but arrived only after the crowd had left.

On Wednesday there were arson attacks on mosques in Belgrade and Nis, leaving a mosque in Nis in ashes. Unidentified persons attacked an Islamic Community Centre in Novi Sad, as well as bakeries and pastry stores belonging to ethnic Albanians in the city.

"The Serbian government's failure to stop arson attacks on mosques is a dangerous step backwards," said Denber. "Serbian authorities must robustly protect its ethnic minorities, their places of worship and businesses, and those who speak out on their behalf."

Human Rights Watch called on the Serbian government to firmly condemn these attacks and swiftly bring to justice those responsible.

Related Material

[Legacy of War: Minority Returns in the Balkans](#)