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THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF YUGOSLAVIA

ISSUE

The human rights record in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) remains of concern. Democratic institutions and human rights machinery are poorly developed, and there is no strong political commitment to greater protection for human rights. Minority rights are of concern in Kosovo, Sandjak and to a lesser extent Vojvodina.

BACKGROUND

Overall, although less egregious than in the early years of the Yugoslav conflict, the Government's human rights record justifiably remains a key element of concern for the international community. The situation is more one of neglect and disregard for human rights, rather than of active persecution, although instances of acute violations of human rights do occur. The Government and its administrative organs, all direct descendants of the former communist regime, consistently demonstrate a fundamental lack of understanding of human rights and show no real political commitment to their protection. Pro-active measures in support of human rights accordingly are virtually non-existent.

Areas which deserve favourable mention are: the existence of numerous human rights organizations which, for the most part, are free to carry out their work; a general social tolerance for minorities; an embattled and small but vigorous free press; and a general government commitment to social services (education, welfare, pensions, assistance to refugees).

Still, the trend is once again worsening and we expect further deterioration in the observance of human rights. This will be due to the collapsing economy, forcing the Government to cut back still more on social services, and a more competitive domestic political situation, which will lead the Government to step up harassment of political opponents and restriction of media freedoms. The surge of the extreme nationalist radical party and its leader Vojislav Seselj is an additional cause for concern.

On political and civil rights, there are grounds for very serious concerns as regards freedoms of the press and speech, electoral process, independence of the judiciary, restrictions on and accountability of police powers, and the rule of law. While the voting for the Serbian parliamentary and presidential elections in 1997 went relatively smoothly and without major technical flaws, in each instance the OSCE observer missions judged the overall electoral process to be unfair due to extensive state control of the media, the electoral commission and the judicial system.

On economic and social rights, although the Government's record has warranted some commendation in past years, we perceive the situation to be worsening. The numbers of those in need of and receiving social assistance are increasing, but the Government's ability to finance its social obligations is diminishing. This applies as well to the over 600,000 refugees from Bosnia and Croatia, many of whom are economically destitute and without basic civic protection. The rights of unions are already severely circumscribed, and as the economic