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FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF YUGOSLAVIA

ISSUE

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

BACKGROUND

Overall, the government's human rights record justifiably remains a serious concern for the international community. With the notable exception of Kosovo, the situation in the country 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. Proactive measures in support of human rights accordingly are virtually nonexistent.

The conflict in Kosovo has been characterized by deliberate attacks upon civilians, who have repeatedly been the victims of gross human rights violations and atrocities. The most recent example was the Racak massacre in which 45 civilians were killed, some execution style. In the FRY's efforts to defeat the armed insurrection launched by the "Kosovo Liberation Army" (UCK) massively disproportionate force has been used. Villages have been completely destroyed, forcing up to 300 000 people to flee the fighting, either within Kosovo or to neighbouring states. With the establishment of the OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission in October 1998, the confidence of the population began to return; the recent deterioration in the situation risks a return to large scale population displacements. Elsewhere in the FRY, the deterioration in respect for human rights continues. This is partly due to the collapsing economy, which forced the government to further cut back on social services, and a more competitive domestic political situation, which has led 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. The FRY has adopted a media law which severely restricts the operations of independent media; similar actions have been taken against the academic community to restrict their freedoms.

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 over 600 000 refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina 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 situation continues to deteriorate, it is believed they will be less respected as well as the rights of employees.