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THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF YUGOSLAVIA

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The human rights record of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) remains a concern. Democratic institutions and human rights machinery are not fully developed, and there is an absence of a strong political commitment to complete protection for human rights. Minority rights are of particular concern in Kosovo, Sandjak and to a lesser extent Vojvodina.

BACKGROUND

Although less egregious than in the early years of the Yugoslav conflict, the government's human rights record remains a concern for the international community. The situation entails neglect and disregard for human rights, and some active persecution. The government and its administrative organs demonstrate a fundamental lack of understanding of human rights, and show insufficient political commitment to their protection. Pro-active measures in support of human rights are virtually non-existent. Instances of acute violations of human rights occur.

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, small but vigorous free press; and, a general government commitment to social services (education, welfare, pensions, assistance to refugees).

However, the trend is not positive and a deterioration in respect for human rights in the FRY is feared. A collapsing economy, forcing the government to cut back still more on social services, and a more competitive domestic political situation, could tempt the government to step up harassment of political opponents and restriction of media freedom. Any movement towards separation in Kosovo would likely be met with harsh reprisals by the Serbian police.

With regard to political and civil rights, there are grounds for serious concern about: freedom of the press and speech; the electoral process; the independence of the judiciary; restrictions on and accountability of police powers; and, the rule of law. Special mention must be made of the municipal elections recently held in the Republic of Serbia. Opposition victories in several municipalities on November 17th were annulled by the government and the judiciary. At the time of writing, voters were in their seventh week of protests against the annulment of the election victories. An OSCE delegation, which included a Canadian electoral expert, invited by Serbian President Milosevic to investigate the issue concluded that the results of the November 17 vote should be respected.

On economic and social rights, the government's record has warranted some commendation in past years. However, 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