

MACEDONIA

THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

Head of state: Boris Trajkovski

Head of government: Branko Crvenkovski (replaced Ljubcho Georgievski in November)

Death penalty: abolitionist for all crimes

International Criminal Court: ratified

Although the human rights situation continued to improve, there were suspected extrajudicial executions and reckless use of firearms by security officials leading to loss of life, and continuing allegations of torture and ill-treatment by police and security officials. There were also reports of unlawful killings and hostage-taking by armed groups, and reports of attacks by "unknown assailants" who were suspected of being connected to the security forces. There were threats against human rights defenders and opposition journalists were attacked.

Background

Ramifications continued from the conflict in 2001 in the north and west of the country between the National Liberation Army (NLA), an ethnic Albanian armed opposition group, and the Macedonian security forces.

In March, an amnesty was granted to all those involved in the conflict, except for those accused of war crimes under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (the Tribunal). Under this amnesty, which followed on from a December 2001 Presidential pardon, 54 people were released. In October, the Trial Chamber of the Tribunal ruled that the Macedonian courts should defer to the competence of the Tribunal in five cases. Four cases involved alleged NLA abuses, and the fifth related to the killing of at least six Albanians in Ljuboten in August 2001, allegedly by the security forces. In April, exhumations of bodies in the Ljuboten case were completed, although the results of the forensic tests had not been made public by the end of 2002.

The peace process continued to be supported by activities of the international community, including up to 200 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and European Union (EU) monitors protected by a NATO force from 11 countries.

Violent incidents decreased although tension was still high. Incidents included bomb attacks and shootings occasionally resulting in loss of life. However, mixed Albanian and Macedonian police units were successfully redeployed under the guidance of OSCE monitors. Although the NLA had disbanded and handed over some of its weapons to NATO, armed Albanian splinter groups continued to operate. Inter-Albanian armed clashes occurred sporadically as former NLA commanders entered the political arena.

After national elections in September, the government led by the predominantly ethnic Macedonian VMRO-DPMNE (the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic

Party for National Unity) was replaced by a coalition led by the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM) and the Democratic Union for Integration (BDI) formed by former NLA leader Ali Ahmeti.

Killings by the security forces

There were concerns at the occasional reckless use of firearms by security officials leading to loss of life. In one case the available information pointed to extrajudicial execution.

On 2 March police shot dead seven men – six from Pakistan and one from India – in a police ambush at Rashtanski Lozja near Skopje. The authorities claimed the men were radical Islamic "terrorists" linked to the NLA and its successors, who were planning to attack western embassies in Skopje. However, the available evidence indicated that the men were all economic migrants on their way to Greece.

On 18 October Metin Adili, an ethnic Albanian, was killed and two others wounded when police opened fire on a car which failed to stop at a roadblock in Tetovo. A police spokesman claimed the occupants of the car had opened fire at the police but OSCE observers reportedly found no evidence to back up this claim.

Police torture and ill-treatment

Police continued to ill-treat people during arrest and in detention. In many cases, especially those involving ethnic Albanians or Roma, the alleged ill-treatment had an ethnic or racial component. Many of the incidents involved members of the "Lions", a special mono-ethnic paramilitary police unit set up by the Interior Ministry following the NLA uprising whose members were widely seen as being pro-VMRO-DPMNE. Cases raised with the Interior Ministry by the office of the People's Defender (Ombudsperson) were dismissed as unfounded despite at times compelling evidence to the contrary. However, in November the new government replied to AI, stating that, in accordance with AI's recommendations, a plan would be drawn up for training police officers and implementing European standards governing the conduct of law enforcement officials. The authorities failed to make available the findings of visits in October 2001 and July and November 2002 by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture.

On 3 April, two Muslim Macedonians, Cano Canoski and Vebija Saloski, were allegedly severely beaten and threatened with guns and knives by six to eight members of the "Lions" while they were gathering wood near Struga.

On 9 October police allegedly ill-treated Arben Ismaili, who suffers from cerebral palsy and is confined to a wheelchair, after he left his home in Nerezi near Skopje with a neighbour, also an ethnic Albanian. Reportedly, they were stopped by police officers who insulted them with racial slurs, and then punched Arben Ismaili repeatedly in the face despite his pleas that he was disabled and had done no wrong.

Attacks by 'unknown assailants'

There were occasional attacks on citizens by "unknown assailants" who may have been connected to the authorities.

☞ On 23 January, a group of masked men armed with automatic weapons attacked and severely injured Pavle Todorovski, the Deputy Leader of the Local Community Council of Tearce near Tetovo, denouncing him as a "Macedonian traitor". No serious police investigation into the attack appeared to have been undertaken and there were suspicions that the perpetrators may have been members of the security forces who attacked him because of his conciliatory stance towards ethnic Albanians.

There were a number of physical attacks on journalists perceived as being in opposition to the authorities.

☞ On 16 July Mare Stoilova, a correspondent with *Al TV*, was attacked by eight men after *Al TV* reported alleged corruption by a VMRO-DPMNE politician.

Human rights defenders threatened

In January there was repeated criticism of the non-governmental Helsinki Committee in the media and on Macedonian television, coordinated by members of the government including the Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior. The Minister of the Interior referred to the Committee's chairperson, Dr Mirjana Najchevska, as "state enemy No. 1", "anti-Macedonian" and an "attorney for the Albanians" because of the Committee's criticism of human rights violations by the authorities against ethnic Albanians. Dr Najchevska received warnings that she might be arrested when she returned to Macedonia from France. However, following pressure by AI and others, she returned safely and the authorities denied that there was ever a threat to her. She was also personally attacked in a Interior Ministry statement after the Committee issued a press release on 3 September questioning the political impartiality of the police. The same statement threatened criminal proceedings against editors of opposition media.

Abuses by armed groups

Members of armed groups, most believed to be connected to remnants of the NLA, committed repeated abuses throughout the year, including killings. During the run-up to the elections there was an increase in tension with a spate of assassinations of former NLA members by rival Albanians, the killing of two policemen by gunmen in Gostivar, short-term abductions, and a series of bomb and grenade attacks on ethnic Albanian political party buildings. In the event, the elections passed off without noticeable incident.

Refugees and the displaced

In October the Macedonian Red Cross reported that the number of registered internally displaced persons due to the 2001 fighting was 9,013, of whom 6,826 were in host family accommodation and 2,187 in the collective centres.

AI country reports/visits

Reports

- Macedonia: Dark days in Tetovo (AI Index: EUR 65/007/2002)
- Macedonia: Possible extrajudicial killing of seven men in Rashtanski Lozja (AI Index: EUR 65/012/2002)
- Macedonia: The "Lions" beat tonight – alleged ill-treatment of citizens by paramilitary police (AI Index: EUR 65/025/2002)