

First Report on violation of the rights of non-Serbian citizens to personal and property security (the Report submitted to the Minister of Justice, Tibor Varadi, on 15 July during the reception of the delegation composed of: Nataša Kandić, Miladin Životić, Ilija Radulović and Nebojša Popov)

HARASSMENT, INTIMIDATION AND DIRECT THREAT TO PERSONAL AND PROPERTY SECURITY OF CITIZENS OF NON-SERBIAN NATIONALITY

The first cases of emigration of Croats occurred during and immediately after the war in Slovenia. Fearing that a possible war would separate them from their children who lived in Croatia, seven or eight families from Hrtkovci, about twenty families from Slankamen, and some families from other settlements in Srem have made their departure. The first emigrants have sold their houses and properties, and since May, Croats (mostly from Hrtkovci, but also from Golubinci, Platičevo, Nikinci) have been exchanging houses and property with Serbs living in parts of Croatia that were not covered by the war. According to the stories of the locals from Hrtkovci, the first emigrants, on the recommendation of the local Croatian authorities (from the vicinity of Ivanovo Polje), sent local Serbs to Hrtkovci and invited their former neighbours to move to Croatia. This way, several families have left and arrived.

Regardless of their nationality, the inhabitants of Hrtkovci, Golubinci, Ruma, Platičevo and Nikinci responded to the JNA army calls. There were about 350 participants in the war from Hrtkovci alone, with the status of volunteers. Refugees from war zones were being received into family households, and "emigrants working outside Serbia used to place families in unused houses. By 1 May 1992, there were about 500 refugee families in Hrtkovci. Since then, the pressure on all villages inhabited mainly by Croats has increased. According to rough estimates, another 800 families have moved to Hrtkovci, about 400 families to Golubinci, and about 10,000 refugees to the Ruma area, mostly from around Podravska Slatina, Grubišno Polje, and from the areas of Bilogora, Papuk, Psunj, Virovitica and Bosanski Brod. According to some data, the majority of these refugees have been housed in Ilok and surrounding Croatian villages, which were left empty after the departure of a convoy of civilians in October 1991. Data on the increased pressure on mixed settlements since May indicate that it was an organised arrival, often with an influx of 200-300 refugees.

At the beginning of May (6 May), the committee of the Serbian Radical Party in Hrtkovci was founded. The party president Vojislav Šešelj spoke at a rally which drew a large number of refugees. He announced the displacement of all Croats "who did something wrong", and the elected Party Secretary, Žilić (a refugee from Zagreb), read the list of the first seventeen people who should leave the village, the list of directors of companies who should be replaced and the list of local government representatives who should be replaced by "real" Serbs. The authority over the criteria for resettlement passed to Ostoja Sibinčić, who has appeared as a representative of the new government and of the interests of those Serbs who have fought for Serbhood. In the presence of a large number of domestic and foreign journalists, he stated who should leave Hrtkovci: all the Croats, Hungarians and unfortunate Serbs who do not agree with the democratic postulates of Serbia, all the Ustasha-inclined Croats who have children in Austria, Germany or another country, all the Croats who are supporters or members of the Democratic Alliance of Croats in Vojvodina, all those who haven't publicly distanced themselves from Tudman's policy, and all those unfortunate Serbs who protect Ustasha-inclined Croats.

By first of June, forty families from Hrtkovci had moved away, almost all from the first list, and by 15 July, approximately 300 families more. A hundred and twenty families have left Golubinci. The same procedure applies in all the relocation cases. Unknown people appear in the village, first in groups

of three, and visit certain houses, ask about exchanges and recommend their property and the property of others who have authorised them to do so. In Golubinci, they visit the Local Community Office and refer to Ostoja Sibinčić from Hrtkovci and Triva Ivković from Novi Sad, of whom many of the refugees say that he is a trustee for Mihalj Kertes and has been engaged on behalf of the Serbian authorities. Telephone threats, menacing leaflets and public naming of people, influence the people to make decisions to exchange their property. Contracts are concluded on a blind basis too, such as in the case of a peasant from the vicinity of Slavonska Požega who arrived at a house which was already inhabited. According to the observations of locals from Hrtkovci and Golubinci, there is a special kind of refugee who comes as a member of a larger group (30-50 people, armed). They usually arrive from across the fields, enter houses without knocking, offer prepared papers on exchange and transfer of property, and threaten physical expulsion. In this way, about fifteen families from Hrtkovci and four families from Golubinci have been thrown out onto the street. This happened to the Pakić family, who have a child who is seriously ill. Six cases of physical abuse have been recorded, including the smashed head of a woman from Golubinci, who was treated in hospital, and the beating of a Hungarian from Hrtkovci with sticks. Unknown people, who were found to be refugees residing in Smederevo and Sremska Mitrovica, brutally killed Milan Štefanac, a Croat from Hrtkovci who had received four refugees into his house.

All these events in Hrtkovci are known to the public. A large group of Belgrade intellectuals, gathered around the Civil Resistance Movement and the Belgrade Circle, spoke twice in June with locals and refugees in Hrtkovci. In order to inform the public about the threat to the rights of Croats and Hungarians to property and personal security, seven press conferences were organised in Hrtkovci, and one in Golubinci. The refugees have perceived any engagement in the protection of the human rights of non-Serb citizens as a betrayal of "the Serbian cause". Representatives of Vojvodina authorities and the Republic authorities have responded to public pressure by giving contradictory statements: "These are individual incidents; those who are moving out are those who wish to move out, and everything will be done to prevent anyone's moving out under pressure". A reduction of tensions and a somewhat greater security for Croats and Hungarians has been achieved after the establishment of Republic police at in the road leading to Hrtkovci and the direct engagement of the authorities in cases of physical eviction of owners from houses. Four families have been returned to their homes. However, according to the latest data from the field, it seems that the Republic police from Hrtkovci have been withdrawn, and the police from Ruma and Sremska Mitrovica, whom the locals do not trust, are there again. In Golubinci, they say that there are cases of collusion between the police and refugees.

The fact that things are following the logic of an intensifying conflict is best reflected in the example of the violent change of the civilian local government, and the renaming of streets, civilian public institutions and places. In Hrtkovci, these activities have finished, although the Municipal Assembly of Ruma has proposed a regular procedure for all these new initiatives. An attempt to elect a new refugee government has failed in Golubinci, but the people's distrust of the authorities is evident: the mixed population have organised themselves, with an agreement to notify each other, with the firing of shots, about any night visitors or supporters of violent exchange of property.

Data on the direct endangerment of non-Serbian citizens were found in Ruma, the Breg neighbourhood, Sremska Mitrovica and Belgrade. About 50 non-Serb citizens of Belgrade have been exposed to telephone threats and physical harassment by refugee groups referring to the Serbian Radical Party and the "Sveti Đorđe" (Saint George) organisation.

The problem of refugees and exiles from war zones is a problem that must be solved by the government institutions. The problem of eviction under pressure, and the endangerment of the personal and property security of citizens, must also be on the agenda of the highest authorities. The public expects the authorities to determine the facts regarding these phenomena and to present data to the public, demonstrating whether or not it is true that the Serbian Radical Party (Serbia Chetnik Movement), “Solidarnost” and “Sveti Đorđe” are directly engaged in the expulsion and harassment of non-Serb citizens, and whether it is true that Mihalj Kertes and Vojislav Šešelj are behind the “ethnic cleansing” in the villages in Vojvodina.

Data prepared from research in the field by
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