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ADVOCATES FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN SERBIA FACE INTIMIDATION AND HATE CRIMES

October 11, 2007, Belgrade, Serbia and Washington, DC: The Serbian government is being accused of responsibility for a recent attack against a peace rally, in which women peace activists were abused and a peace flag was broken.

The violence was directed against Women in Black while they were participating at a Women's fair in Central Belgrade last Saturday. It is seen as proof that the Serbian authorities are tacitly encouraging violence and intimidation against those who oppose a nationalist agenda.

According to a press statement from Women in Black, a man approached their group, seized the peace flag and broke the flagpole. When told that the event was authorized by the police, he responded: "Beat it, faggot, sicko! I will kill you, break your arms and legs!"

Initially the police declined to intervene. After Women in Black activist Natalija Vušković protested, the police approached the aggressor but treated him in a "brotherly" manner and reacted roughly to the Women in Black.

The police took down details and took testimony from three witnesses. They later said that the man had accused Women in Black of promoting "sick homosexuality."

Women in Black is calling on the government to prosecute the aggressor for a hate crime, but they also see the incident as symptomatic of government tolerance for neofascism that is deeply at odds with prevailing sentiment in Western Europe. Serbia wants to join the European Union but has refused to compromise with the EU over the independence of Kosovo, promoting fears of another conflict.

"This is only one in a series of attacks on Women in Black, on political ideas, on the ethical principles of our women's peace politics," said the statement from Women in Black. "This act of violence is part of the continuity of repression which Women in Black experiences from people, with Vojislav Koštunica at the head, who support a social climate of impunity."

Meanwhile a rally this weekend in Novi Sad by the National League, an illegal Neo-Nazi organization was allowed to proceed. In a recent bulletin, Women in Black criticized the Serbian government and even the church for tolerating nationalism and a climate that is "glorifying as national heroes proven criminals such as Slobodan Milošević and Ratko Mladić."

Meanwhile, in a further sign of Serbia's estrangement from Europe, a recent communiqué from Women in Black charged that the Serbian government had sold 54 howitzers to the government of Myanmar in 2005.

Gail Morgado, from Georgetown University, volunteered with Women in Black this summer as an Advocacy Project Peace Fellow and help the group with their information. She accompanied a delegation from Women in Black to attend the July 11 memorial service in Bosnia for those who were killed by Serbs at the 1995 Srebrenica massacre.

- To express solidarity with Women in Black and for more information email Stasa or Rachel: stasazen@EUnet.yu
- To read Gail Morgado's blogs and see her video of the Srebrenica service, visit <http://advocacynet.org/author/gail/>

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