

OHR expresses concern over campaign of intimidation against BiH Croats

There are serious indications that the proponents of Croat "self-rule" are waging a systematic campaign of threats and intimidation to try and force BiH Croats to back the illegal and unconstitutional activities of a small group of hardliners.

The OSCE has already informed the public of the increased amount of calls from worried reporters, under pressure from supporters of "self-rule", to the organisation's helpline for journalists. The same activists put up posters and print shocking leaflets in which they call law-abiding citizens "traitors" and threaten them with a "punishment" for them and their families which end "in the grave".

This widespread campaign of harassment has also been aimed on an individual level at soldiers, the police and businesspeople. Soldiers are either called or visited at home. The Office of the High Representative has information that many police officers are also being visited at home, where the supporters of "self-rule" demand they sign papers declaring loyalty to them.

The OHR cannot give names or allude to individual cases because these Bosnian and Herzegovinian Croats fear for their lives and the lives of their families.

Businesspeople are also under threat. The bomb attack against the Ivankovic brothers, for their outspoken stand against the "self-rule", is just the most public example. At the weekend, Mr Jerko Ivankovic, a member of the BiH House of Peoples as well as the joint owner of the Lijanovici meat factory, said the threats have only got worse since the bomb attack, telling

the media at the weekend that he and his family have been threatened with death if he doesn't leave the State parliament.

Many businesspeople have come to our offices to complain of threats against them if they don't pay cash to the "self-rule". In just one example, a businessman in Herzegovina was called in by supporters of "self-rule" who demanded that he pay a "tax" to them. The businessman refused. He was then told by the supporters of "self-rule" that if he didn't pay up, "accidents" could happen to him or his family.

This kind of activity has nothing to do with Croat rights and has everything to do with a small bunch of extremists who have to rely on fear to get their way. These are a group of people who themselves fear the rule of law, which is getting stronger day by day in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The OHR calls on Bosnian and Herzegovinian Croats to think hard about where money for so-called ""self-rule"" goes. Will it end up in projects like the Ministerska building in Mostar? How do "self-rule" officials afford the cars they drive on their salaries? Why are "self-rule" officials still drawing Federation salaries when they have supposed to have quit? Who will ensure any financial transparency in this environment of intimidation? These are important questions to ask because the current government in Zagreb has made clear that it will not finance illegal parallel institutions.

The OHR appeals to BiH Croats not to give in to criminal bullies who have only their narrow self-interests at heart.