



The Human Rights Advisory Panel

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DECISION

Date of adoption: 16 December 2011

Case No. 271/09

Vladimir ŠČEPANOVIĆ

against

UNMIK

The Human Rights Advisory Panel, sitting on 16 December 2011,
with the following members present:

Mr Marek NOWICKI
Mr Paul LEMMENS
Ms Christine CHINKIN

Assisted by
Mr Andrey ANTONOV, Executive Officer

Having considered the aforementioned complaint, introduced pursuant to Section 1.2 of UNMIK Regulation No. 2006/12 of 23 March 2006 on the Establishment of the Human Rights Advisory Panel,

Having deliberated, decides as follows:

I. PROCEEDINGS BEFORE THE PANEL

1. The complaint was introduced on 10 April 2009 and registered on 30 April 2009.
2. On 24 November 2010 the Panel requested the complainant to submit additional information. No response to this request was received. On 28 September 2011 the Panel reiterated its request for additional information. Again no response was received.

3. On 23 September 2011 the complaint was communicated to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), for UNMIK's comments on admissibility. On 8 November 2011 UNMIK provided its response.

II. THE FACTS

4. The complainant is the brother of Mr Aleksandar Šćepanović. The complainant states that his brother disappeared on 18 June 1999.
5. The complainant claims to have reported his brother's disappearance to KFOR, the International Prosecutor's Office in Prishtinë/Priština, the Yugoslav Red Cross, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), but the perpetrators were never found.
6. According to the death certificate issued by the Office of the Medical Examiner of the Office of the Missing Persons and Forensics (OMPF) of the UNMIK Department of Justice on 17 November 2005, the mortal remains of Mr Aleksandar Šćepanović were found on 15 October 2002 at an unidentified location in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica municipality. The autopsy that was conducted on 15 November 2002 could only establish that the death had occurred "prior 15 October 2002", but the cause of death was unascertained. The identified mortal remains were handed over to the complainant on 8 December 2005.
7. On 9 December 2008, UNMIK's responsibility with regard to police and justice in Kosovo ended with the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) assuming full operational control in the area of the rule of law, following the Statement made by the President of the United Nations Security Council on 26 November 2008 (S/PRST/2008/44), welcoming the continued engagement of the European Union in Kosovo. Between 9 December 2008 and 30 March 2009, all criminal case files held by the UNMIK Department of Justice and UNMIK Police were handed over to their EULEX counterparts.

III. THE COMPLAINT

8. The complainant complains about UNMIK's alleged failure to properly investigate the disappearance and killing of his brother and about the fear, pain and anguish suffered by himself because of this situation.
9. The Panel considers that the complainant may be deemed to invoke a violation of the right to life of his brother, guaranteed by Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), and a violation of his own right to be free from inhuman or degrading treatment, guaranteed by Article 3 of the ECHR.

IV. THE LAW

10. Before considering the case on its merits, the Panel must first decide whether to accept the case, considering the admissibility criteria set out in Sections 1, 2 and 3 of UNMIK Regulation No. 2006/12.

Alleged violation of Article 2 of the ECHR

11. The complainant alleges in substance the lack of an adequate criminal investigation into the disappearance and killing of Mr Aleksandar Šćepanović.
12. In his comments, the SRSG does not raise any objection to the admissibility of this part of the complaint.
13. The Panel considers that the complaint under Article 2 of the ECHR raises serious issues of fact and law, the determination of which should depend on an examination of the merits. The Panel concludes therefore that this part of the complaint is not manifestly ill-founded within the meaning of Section 3.3 of UNMIK Regulation No. 2006/12.
14. No other ground for declaring this part of the complaint inadmissible has been established.

Alleged violation of Article 3 of the ECHR

15. The complainant alleges mental pain and suffering allegedly caused to him by the situation surrounding the disappearance and killing of his brother.
16. The Panel refers to the case law of the European Court of Human Rights with respect to the question whether a member of the family of a disappeared person can be considered the victim of a treatment contrary to Article 3 of the ECHR, which prohibits inhuman treatment. The European Court accepts that this may be the case, depending on the existence of “special factors which give the suffering of the [family member] a dimension and character distinct from the emotional distress which may be regarded as inevitably caused to relatives of a victim of a serious human rights violation”. The Court further holds that “relevant elements will include the proximity of the family tie, the particular circumstances of the relationship, the extent to which the family member witnessed the events in question, the involvement of the family member in the attempts to obtain information about the disappeared person and the way in which the authorities responded to those enquiries”. It also emphasises “that the essence of such a violation does not so much lie in the fact of the disappearance of the family member but rather concerns the authorities’ reactions and attitudes to the situation when it is brought to their attention” (see, e.g., European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) (Grand Chamber), *Çakici v. Turkey*, no. 23657/94, judgment of 8 July 1999, § 98, *ECHR*, 1999-IV; ECtHR (Grand Chamber), *Cyprus v. Turkey*, no. 25781/94, judgment of 10 May 2001, § 156, *ECHR*, 2001-IV; ECtHR, *Orhan v. Turkey*, no. 25656/94, judgment of 18 June 2002, § 358; ECtHR, *Bazorkina v. Russia*, no. 69481/01, judgment of 27 July 2006, § 139; see also Human Rights Advisory Panel [HRAP], *Zdravković*, no. 46/08, decision of 17 April 2009, § 41).
17. The Panel considers that a complainant may invoke a violation of Article 3 of the ECHR even if there is no explicit reference to specific acts of the authorities involved in the investigation, since also the passivity of the authorities and the absence of information given to the complainant may be indicative of inhuman treatment of the complainant by the authorities (see HRAP, *Mladenović*, no. 99/09, decision of 11 August 2011, § 22).

18. However, where the disappeared person is later found dead, the applicability of Article 3 of the ECHR is in general limited to the distinct period during which the member of the family sustained uncertainty, anguish and distress appertaining to the specific phenomenon of disappearances (see, e.g., ECtHR, *Luluyev and Others v. Russia*, no. 69480/01, judgment of 9 November 2006, §§ 114-115, *ECHR*, 2006-XIII; see also ECtHR, *Gongadze v. Ukraine*, no. 34056/02, judgment of 8 November 2005, § 185, *ECHR*, 2005-XI).
19. In this respect, the question arises whether the complaint has been filed in time. Section 3.1 of UNMIK Regulation No. 2006/12 states that the Panel “may only deal with a matter ... within a period of six months from the date on which the final decision was taken”. As a rule, the six-month period runs from the date of the final decision in the process of exhaustion of domestic remedies. Where it is clear from the outset however that no effective remedy is available to the complainant, the period runs from the date of the acts or measures complained of, or from the date of knowledge of that act, or its effect on or prejudice to the complainant (ECtHR (Grand Chamber), *Varnava and Others v. Turkey*, nos. 16064/90 and others, judgment of 18 September 2009, § 157). Where the complaint relates to a continuing situation, which has come to an end, the six-month time limit starts to run from the date on which the situation has come to an end.
20. The Panel notes that the mortal remains of Mr Aleksandar Šćepanović were returned to the complainant on 8 December 2005. It is at that moment that the period during which an issue could arise under Article 3 of the ECHR came to an end. For the purpose of Section 3.1 of UNMIK Regulation No. 2006/12, the six-month time limit therefore started to run from that date.
21. The complaint was filed with the Panel on 10 April 2009, that is after the expiration of the above-referred six-month period.
22. The Panel therefore must conclude that this part of the complaint falls outside the time-limit set by Section 3.1 of UNMIK Regulation No. 2006/12.

FOR THESE REASONS,

The Panel, unanimously,

- **DECLARES ADMISSIBLE THE COMPLAINT RELATING TO THE RIGHT TO LIFE;**
- **DECLARES INADMISSIBLE THE REMAINDER OF THE COMPLAINT.**

Andrey ANTONOV
Executive Officer

Marek NOWICKI
Presiding Member