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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the Anniversary of the Bytyqi Brothers' Disappearance in Serbia

As delivered by Deputy Chief of Mission Gary Robbins
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
July 5, 2012

July 8 of this year marks a somber anniversary. Thirteen years ago that day, three U.S. citizens, brothers from New York State, disappeared after being arrested by police in southern Serbia. The three young men, Ylli, Agron, and Mehmet Bytyqi, were escorting Roma neighbors from Kosovo to the Serbian border following the end of the NATO intervention when they accidentally strayed into Serbian territory and were detained.

While serving a two week sentence for illegally entering Yugoslavia, they were set free by a Serbian judge; however, they never emerged from the jail. For two years, no one knew what had become of the three brothers. It was later discovered that they had been taken out the back exit of the building by officers of a special operations unit of the Serbian Ministry of Interior, taken to a Ministry of Interior special forces training camp in eastern Serbia, and brutally executed before being buried in a mass grave with approximately 75 ethnic Albanians from Kosovo. In July 2001, after Slobodan Milosevic was defeated, the new Serbian government dug up the mass grave. The brothers' bodies were identified and eventually repatriated to the United States for burial.

These three brothers were not afforded the opportunity to defend themselves in a court of law. They were not given a fair and public trial. Paramilitaries, under the command of senior Ministry of Interior officials, denied them these rights and shot them in cold blood. While many of the crimes that occurred during this period have been successfully prosecuted, those responsible for this crime have eluded justice. Eleven years after the discovery of their bodies, no one has been held accountable for their murders. The chief suspects in the chain of command, including the camp commander, have never been charged.

The wall of silence in the Interior Ministry, which protects those who are widely believed to have ordered this and similar crimes, remains intact. This wall of silence does not just protect the perpetrators of this crime; countless other abuses of power have gone unpunished. Those who ordered the attacks on western embassies in February 2008, which caused millions of dollars of damage and resulted in the death of a protestor, remain unprosecuted as well.

As we approach the 13th anniversary of the disappearance of these three brothers and the 11th anniversary of the discovery of their bodies, we call on the Government of Serbia to demonstrate its commitment to the rule of law and redouble its efforts to investigate and prosecute those believed to be responsible for these crimes. We call on the Government of Serbia to continue on its path of reform, particularly reform of the Interior Ministry, to ensure accountability for past acts and to ensure that those entrusted with responsibility for upholding the law are held accountable before a court of law when they abuse their positions. The United States Government cannot accept that the murders of three U.S. citizens should remain unpunished. We will continue to press for justice in this case.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.