

## **Kosovar Abuse Victims in Jeopardy**

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Theft of details of victims of wartime rapes, prostitution and human trafficking sparks concerns.

Fears are growing for the safety of thousands of women who testified on human rights abuses following the theft of computer hard drives containing details of their identities.

The sensitive information, gleaned over the last ten years, was stolen during a burglary at the Centre for Protection of Women and Children, CWPC, in Pristina on January 4 - and the authorities are still no nearer identifying the culprits.

As the police have not recovered the hardware or questioned anyone in connection with the theft, workers at the non-governmental organisation, NGO, has sought to protect the women named in the files - who had testified on experiences including rape, domestic violence, human trafficking and forced prostitution.

CWPC has given the women new identities and introduced new security measures at its safe houses.

As the thieves had only certain hard disks - leaving behind computers, monitors, keyboards and other valuables - staff believe that there is a very real danger that they were looking only for the files relating to the women's evidence.

In the aftermath of the Kosovo conflict, CPWC collected extensive testimonies from women raped by Serb troops during the NATO bombing. In the past two years, the centre has mostly dealt with victims of trafficking, forced prostitution and domestic violence.

This information could be used to blackmail the victims who had agreed to speak out or, more worryingly, to hunt them down and kill them.

Whatever the reason for the thefts, the centre's director Sevdije Ahmeti - who said there were more than 650 personal testimonies stored on the hard drives - is unhappy with United Nations Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK, police, claiming that they failed to investigate four attempted break-ins at the centre in the two months prior to the thefts.

UNMIK spokesman Barry Fletcher said, "We patrolled 24 hours a day in the town before and after the incident and try our best to prevent such crimes - but we are not security guards for private businesses."

Ahmeti believes organisations such as CWPC should be able to request and receive better protection from the police. "We have treated and sheltered victims who are usually too scared to speak to the Kosovo police service (which is run by UNMIK) about their plight," she said.

UNMIK's serious crime squad, which is investigating the burglary, has refused to comment on whether the police have taken any measures to protect those women at risk. "The least information available to the public about this case, the better," team chief Dave Wilson told IWPR.

There were no witnesses to the break-in at the office in central Pristina, and no doors or windows were damaged. Ahmeti said that even though the theft took place on a rainy night, no footprints or fingerprints of any kind have been discovered.

Human Rights Watch, HRW, has called on the authorities to launch a thorough investigation into the "alarming" theft.

Elizabeth Andersen, executive director of HRW's Europe and Central Asia division, said, "This highlights the very serious problem of victim and witness intimidation that has hobbled law enforcement efforts [in the protectorate] for the past three years. If they hope to curb Kosovo's lawlessness, the UN and its member states must make witness protection a top priority.

"The failure of the government to take this incident seriously will leave NGOs working on trafficking open to further violence and intimidation, have a chilling effect on victims' willingness to share information about their ordeals, and as a consequence will put women's lives in danger," she warned.

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**Location:** Central Asia  
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