

## **Macedonia: Mass Grave Furore**

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Mass grave mystery threatens to derail the Macedonian peace process.

Reports of a mass grave in the mainly Albanian village of Dzepciste in western Macedonia have become the latest spoke in the wheels of the Balkan state's troubled peace process.

The Macedonian media believes the grave, which has not been excavated, may hold the key to the disappearance of 12 civilians kidnapped by Albanian rebels during their four-month insurrection earlier this year.

It may also solve the mystery about Dimitrija Dimovski, a 62-year-old pensioner from Tetovo, who vanished in the last week of July on a visit to Dzepciste, 10 km away, where he owned land.

Dimovski's Albanian neighbours said he enjoyed good relations with their community and that he spoke Albanian fluently.

Confident that he was safe, in spite of the hostilities raging in western Macedonia between government forces and Albanian rebels, he left Tetovo for Dzepciste on July 23 to water his fields.

That afternoon, as clashes erupted between troops and Albanian fighters, neighbours urged to him to take cover. "The villagers advised Dimitrija to spend the night in the village with other Macedonians from Tetovo," the village mayor Naser Jonuzi recalled. " But he did not take the advice."

Dimovski's cousin, Tomislav Dobrevski, who lives in Dzepciste, confirms the mayor's version of events. "I begged Dimitrija to stay in my house but he pumped up the tires of his bike and set off over the field to the Tetovo-Skopje highway," he said. "Since then nobody has heard from him."

Dobrevski said his cousin's assailants had no obvious motive. "He was not a reservist and was unarmed," he said. "Macedonian reservists who were kidnapped were later released by the [rebel Albanian] NLA. My son got even his gun back."

Dimovski's disappearance is linked to the existence of an alleged mass grave between Dzepciste and Neprosteno. The report surfaced in the Macedonian media as parliament threatened to block the passage of internationally-brokered constitutional amendments agreed in Ohrid in August, aimed at ending the Albanian revolt.

Before the press broke its story, the speaker of parliament, Stojan Andov, had already announced in mid-October that he would not schedule a parliamentary session to debate the amendments until the fate of 12 disappeared Macedonians was solved.

The prime minister, Ljubco Georgievski, from the nationalist Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation, VMRO-DPMNE, backed Andov's strategy. On October 31, he said parliament would not vote on the amendments until the mystery over the kidnapped civilians was cleared up.

Georgievski and Andov, strong opponents of the Macedonian peace process, have been accused of using the crisis over vanished civilians to postpone any action on the constitutional changes, which were supposed to take place in September, after NATO forces completed the disarmament of Albanian rebels.

Under strong international pressure, however, a parliamentary session on the amendments was set for November 8. Their official adoption is scheduled for November 12.

Meanwhile, reports of a mass grave and claims that the corpses were burned - and covered with dead cattle before being buried - continue to fuel public anger.

After a whole month of reports in Macedonian press, the newspaper Utrinski Vjesnik last week even published a detailed map of the grave, locating it near a factory between Dzepciste and Neprostenno.

The factory manager, Bekim Idrizi, said the report was nonsense. "I'm amazed by claims that there is a mass grave here but I don't trust the Macedonian media," he said. "We have no knowledge of any such thing in the vicinity." He pointed out the location photographed by the media, where only rubbish and weeds are visible.

To add to the confusion, the government still has not investigated the site. Deputy premier Ilija Filipovski claimed the authorities could not start digging until the interior minister, Ljube Boskovski, gave the order. When asked why no such order had come from the minister, he answered, "You should remind him."

Ljube Boskovski, the hard-line interior minister, and a hawkish member of VMRO-DPMNE, is opposed to the Ohrid peace agreement. As a fierce Macedonian nationalist, he would not hesitate to dig up the site if he thought that Macedonians were really buried there.

The international community has not investigated the site either. OSCE officials say they have no mandate or equipment in Macedonia for the task and NATO's contingent in the republic takes the same line.

However, the media believe both international bodies will co-operate with the local authorities in clearing up this case out of concern for the future of the peace process.

The newspaper Dnevnik suggested they will urge their head offices to send experts with experience in mass grave excavation from Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo.

The case was internationalised on October 30, when President Boris Trajkovski wrote to The Hague chief prosecutor, Carla Del Ponte, requesting "a procedure for determining the truth about the alleged grave in Neprostenno". The chief prosecutor's spokesperson, Florence Hartmann, told IWPR that Del Ponte has replied requesting further information about the claims.

In the meantime, Albanians worry that the nationalist parties have raised the issue of the mass grave solely to block implementation of the Ohrid peace deal.

"We are truly worried about missing people, because apart from the 12 Macedonians, 53 Albanians are also missing," said Zahir Bektashi, of the Party for Democratic Prosperity, one of the two large Albanian parties in parliament. "But the problem is being politicised to obstruct the Framework Agreement adopted in Ohrid."

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**Location:** Macedonia  
Kosovo  
Croatia  
Bosnia and  
Herzegovina

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