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## **Bosnia and Herzegovina: Woman Environmental Rights Defender Hajrija Čobo facing defamation lawsuit**

On 11 January 2024, the woman human rights defender **Hajrija Čobo** submitted her defense to the court on a case of defamation lawsuit filed by the British mining company [Adriatic Metals BH d.o.o.](#) The company accuses the woman human rights defender of spreading false information about the company in the media and through her social media network, and demands compensation for the damage to the company's reputation.

[Hajrija Čobo](#) is a woman environmental rights defender from Kakanj and a representative of **NGG Park prirode Trstionica i Boriva**, an informal grassroots group of local activists who campaign to protect their forests and rivers which are their main source of drinking water. An elementary and secondary school teacher by profession, Hajrija Čobo fights against corruption and the destruction of the environment in her country. The environmental rights defender speaks out to raise awareness on the consequences of mining in her hometown Kakanj including deforestation, pollution of the environment and natural watercourses in the region, but also of the health risks posed by the extraction of minerals with heavy metals and carcinogenic elements.

On 12 December 2023, woman environmental rights defender received a notice of a defamation lawsuit filed by the British mining company [Adriatic Metals BH d.o.o.](#) which was awarded a concession for exploration and extraction of ores in the Vareš region of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The company accuses the woman human rights defender of spreading false information about the company in the media and through her social network, and demands compensation for the damage to the company's reputation. The lawsuit which bears the characteristics of a strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP) was a direct response to her campaigning to protect the forest and watercourses in the Kakanj region against the threats posed by the company's ore exploration and exploitation. The company demands compensation of 2,000 KM (approximately 1,000€) for non-material damages.

The woman human rights defender together with the Park prirode Trstionica i Boriva group has been advocating for the protection of the forests and riverbeds since May 2022, when she first found out that a concrete plant was illegally built in Mehoric, near the mine area.. Upon her complaint to the authorities, an inspection was carried out which found that the building was constructed without the necessary permissions, and the local subcontractor company Trgošped was fined. The building was demolished shortly after and although the Adriatic Metals management promised to get the area restored, there hasn't been any improvement on the restoration work. On the contrary, the contracting company continued to cut trees and dig out the soil to open a road for the trucks to drive to the mining area, dumping all debris to the banks of the Boriva and Trstionica rivers, narrowing the flow of water stream as well as polluting it.

On 4 October 2023, Adriatic Metals sent the environmental rights defender a formal request to publish a denial "in order to reduce the damage caused by defamation and damage to the reputation, and to inform the public correctly", according to the Article 8 of the Law on Protection against Defamation of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The company referred to several news reports where Hajrija Čobo warned the public about potential risks of discharging heavy metals into the groundwater and the current health problems posed by the polluted water such as skin irritations, sores and rashes, requesting her to correct the allegedly false information within 24

hours upon receipt of the request. In response, **Hajrija Čobo** repeated how the water contamination affected the citizens in Kakanj. The defamation lawsuit was initiated several days later.

According to the woman environmental rights defender, in July 2022, right after a public consultation meeting organised by the mining company where she was very outspoken about the activities of the company, staff from the sustainability department of Adriatic Metal approached her and offered funds for any environmental project that she or the group would want to run. This was apparently an attempt to silence her. Hajrija Čobo and the Park prirode Trstionica i Boriva group kept raising attention of the public and the country authorities on the deforestation, pollution and habitat loss as a result of the mining activities through formal complaints as well as publishing videos and reports on social media networks and staging protest.

Since June 2022, after she exposed the illegal construction in Mehoric, the woman environmental rights defender started receiving threats both on her social media posts and on her phone, as well as in-person “friendly” warnings from local individuals who approached her to warn that she needed to be careful as someone would kill her. In March 2023 the threats ceased after the police intervened and called in the owner of a threat message for questioning.

Front Line Defenders expresses its concern about the lawsuit initiated against Hajrija Čobo which has the characteristics of SLAPP, which has increasingly become a repression tool to intimidate and silence human rights defenders and journalist who speak truth to power. The organisation believes that human rights defenders need to be protected from SLAPP in order to fulfill Bosnia and Herzegovina’s duty to ensure a safe environment where all human rights defenders can work without fear of reprisals and intimidation.

#### **Front Line Defenders calls on the Adriatic Metals BH d.o.o to:**

1. Immediately withdraw the lawsuit you initiated against the woman human rights defender Hajrija Čobo.

#### **Front Line Defenders calls on the authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina to:**

1. Dismiss the court proceedings against Hajrija Čobo, as the lawsuit has the characteristics of SLAPP and targets the woman human rights defender for her legitimate and peaceful human rights work;
2. Ensure that the courts have the necessary legal instruments to tackle SLAPPs, which aim to silence the critical voices, including those of human rights defenders;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders and their organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina are able to carry out their human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, in line with Bosnia and Herzegovina’s international human rights obligations and commitments