

## **YUGOSLAVIA: Romani Evangelicals Ordered to Pull Down Tent Church**

**by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 14 May 2001**

Despite pledges by municipal leaders in the Serbian city of Leskovac 290 kilometres (180 miles) south of Belgrade to respect the rights of a Romani (Gypsy) Evangelical Fellowship, the Communal Inspectorate has ordered the removal by 18 May of a large tent erected on church-owned land in a predominantly Romani suburb. The order - issued on 10 May - is the second within a month, though this time any appeal by the church to a higher body cannot prevent the tent's removal. The local Department for Construction and Communal Works has been seeking to remove the tent for months and the head of the city planning office told Keston News Service that it will not issue a permit to legalise the church.

The city's Evangelical Church - of which the Romani Fellowship, together with the Serbian Fellowship, is a part - bought land in the Slavko Zlatanovic settlement on the city outskirts last October. In March, a Romani church from France sent the tent, which could hold 1,000 people, to accommodate the ever-growing number of people coming on Sundays. The tent was erected at the end of March.

'When we bought the land we hoped our troubles would be at an end. Having 1,000 attending a building in the city centre that can hold only 300 forced us to organise three services every Sunday, with a constant stream of people arriving or leaving,' Selim Alijevic, pastor of the Romani Fellowship, told Keston by telephone from Leskovac on 4 May. 'We believed city officials would welcome our plans to "free" the centre by moving our church, but we were wrong.' He attributed the senior planning official's refusal to legalise the tent partly to Serbian nationalism and partly to religious differences. 'She believes she is helping the Serbian Orthodox Church.'

About 100 Serbs living close to the tent signed a petition to the municipality calling for its removal. 'Communal inspectors appeared in our tent giving us three days to pull it down,' Alijevic complained. 'We objected to the Department of Construction and Communal Works but they rejected our complaint.' The department told them the church's land is officially a 'water supply area' where building is not permitted. 'This would be correct were there not 29 solidly-built houses in the same area and many other support buildings and no-one is tearing them down, regulations or not.'

A Romani delegation, including the church leaders, went to the Planning Department in early April to discuss this issue with its head, Smilja Pavlovic. 'She told us that no other religion is allowed here, and we heard that she said we should not have a church in the city,' Alijevic reported. 'Then we went to the mayor, Dragoljub Zivkovic, who was friendly and assured us a solution would be found. A city official promised we would receive permission for even two churches if needed, but no solution came.'

'This is completely inaccurate information,' Pavlovic told Keston from Leskovac on 7 May. 'I have no personal interest to either support or do anything against this sect.' She

claimed that under the city plan no building in the settlement was legal. 'Also, there is no religious or sacral building planned.' However, she reported that a special regulation is now in force to legalise some buildings. 'At the moment, we are working hard to legalise the local Serbian Orthodox church, our church, and this has already taken us two years. It is not true that we look at who is who and then make decisions. We implement decisions fairly. You should not take into consideration rumours, but the law. There will be no permit for the Romani sect building.'

Although the municipality allowed the church to hold Easter services, Miodrag Stankovic, senior pastor of the Evangelical church, remains distrustful. 'After long negotiations, we conclude that despite fine words from local politicians, officials in the municipal administration hate us,' he told Keston. 'Since they cannot harm us otherwise, they are using an obsolete regulation - that no-one else observes - to prevent us having a Romani church. The Romani people feel embarrassed and hurt, as they feel this church belongs to the whole Romani community.'

Stankovic reported that 1,700 of some 8,000 local Romanies signed a petition to the municipality calling for it to allow the tent to be used for services. 'The city tolerates our Serbian fellowship, but they are trying to prevent the Romani fellowship from developing.' (END)