

SERBIA: ATTACKS ON BELGRADE MUSLIM COMMUNITY INTENSIFIED

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 15 June 2001

After the most recent attack in which an old religious monument (nishan) in the grounds of Belgrade's "Bajrakli" mosque was broken one week ago, unknown perpetrators have within the past week stolen two vehicles of the Belgrade Islamic Faith Community (IFC), vandalised a third and intimidated the Belgrade mufti in his residence at night. The police have been informed and the Serbian Ministry of Religion has issued a press statement condemning the attacks.

"During the previous war crisis, 1991-96, seven times someone threw dynamite and hand grenades into our mosque yard and on the very building," said Hadzi Hamdija Effendi Jusufspahic, Mufti of the Belgrade IFC to Keston News Service on 14 June, "but we never made an issue of it. Only one person was convicted for one bombing done in 1992, and he later came to give his excuse to us, but later publicly said that he would do it again if he finds an opportunity. We are really trying to live in peace with people here, as we did for many centuries, but this is becoming blatant." The "Bajrakli" mosque building is more than 400 years old, and it is a building under the protection of the law, as a Cultural heritage site. It is the only mosque in Belgrade.

The new series of attacks started on 13 April, when gravestones in the Borca Muslim graveyard of Belgrade were vandalised. "We have no proper graveyard for Muslim rite burials. The sites we have on two city graveyards are full, and we hope that soon we will have a new burial site in Belgrade. But, this attack hurts a lot." Jusufspahic said.

The next attack came 8 nights ago, when unknown individuals broke a large stone monument carved in 1254 year of the Muslim calendar. Mufti Jusufspahic continued "It takes a large man to move and break this stone monument, or there were several of them. We did not call the police even then, because we thought that some things should be instantly put behind us. We truly want to report about the good things only, but it seems that this was not good enough this time."

Within the past week on one night ago someone damaged a vehicle in front of the mosque, probably using a hammer to smash the windows. "That very night two other incidents occurred", said the Mufti, "someone have stolen two cars in front of my residence. They tried to enter the house, they knocked at the door, but we did not open. We desire not to evaluate these incidents for the press, thank you for your interest."

The Serbian Ministry of Religion issued a statement on 13 June condemning the "unknown individuals acting against the Islamic community". The Ministry stated that "destroying the monument in front of the mosque in Belgrade and gravestones in Borca, as well as intimidation of the Belgrade mufti, are acts forbidden by the law and completely contrary to many centuries of religious and ethical tolerance of the civil society in Belgrade."

These latest attacks against the Belgrade IFC come after recent anti-Semitic inscriptions at the Jewish religious community building and synagogue, windows at

the Belgrade Baptist Church being broken, and also after neo-Nazi symbols have been painted at an art gallery showing the life of Gypsies (Romani) in Belgrade. The police have been unable to identify any of the perpetrators so far. (END).