

BOSNIA: Ferhadija Mosque Reconstruction Started

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 19 June 2001

After the initial attempt on 7 May to lay the foundation stone for the reconstruction of the Ferhadija mosque in Banja Luka destroyed in 1993 had to be abandoned amid widespread violence from local Serbs, the second attempt was successful. In the presence of leaders of the two entities of Bosnia, the Republika Srpska (RS) and the Muslim-Croat Federation, international representatives and the American and British ambassadors, and under heavy police protection, the Reis-ul-ulema Mustafa Effendi Ceric, head of the Islamic Faith Community in Bosnia, laid the foundation stone on 18 June on the site of the previous mosque.

'We did it yesterday and we are all very satisfied,' Dusan Antelj, religion minister in the Republika Srpska government, told Keston News Service by telephone from Banja Luka on 19 June. 'We had to use strong police force and serious planning to prevent riots, but we managed to complete the ceremony without interruption. Unfortunately, the last time the whole situation was highly politicised, and we could not avoid it.'

As organised crowds of Bosnian Serbs prevented the initial laying of the foundation stone on 7 May, more than 30 people were severely injured and one died later in hospital, police vehicles and buses were set on fire, and senior guests were trapped in a building for several hours (see KNS 8 May 2001).

Again on 18 June, minor incidents occurred. Three policemen received severe injuries, with a further twelve lightly injured. Five demonstrators were arrested after some 500 angry protesters throwing bottles and stones attacked the police cordon, shouting 'Turks!' 'This is Serbia!' 'We do not want mosques!'

The Bosnian Serb authorities were praised for preventing disruption to the ceremony this time round. 'The RS has shown the high level of its civilisation to the world,' Zlatko Lagumdžija, the country's foreign minister, declared in a press statement, commending the police for 'excellent security measures'. The RS Prime Minister Mladen Ivanic stated: 'This day serves as a mark of democracy and respect for human rights in the RS.' Reis-ul-ulema Ceric declared in his speech at the ceremony that 'laying the foundation stone for this mosque means the return of peace and tolerance in Bosnia', the SRNA agency reported on 18 June.

The Muslim officials and other guests left Banja Luka safely after the ceremony, but after their departure riots continued until early evening. At about 2 pm, there was an anonymous claim there was a bomb in the Banja Luka municipal building, an apparent attempt to disrupt the ceremony close by, but police confirmed the alarm was false.

Because of the political damage over the 7 May riots, the RS interior minister resigned and the Banja Luka police chief was replaced. During the riots Antelj remained with the besieged guests in a building, appealing to the crowd to calm down.

He now claims the RS government has unilaterally decided to allow the restoration of religious sites: 'Initially, our government tried to make a reciprocal agreement with representatives of the Muslim-Croat Federation, but this was not well received in the international community. Therefore, we have decided to let our religious communities, all four of them: the Orthodox, the Catholic, the Muslim and the Jewish, build and restore their religious buildings freely in RS.' As evidence he cited the 'instant approval' given to rebuild several mosques. 'For instance, in the town of Kozarac near Prijedor, one mosque is already completed, and two more are close to completion. We had no problems with the non-Muslim population at all. In the town of Gradiska (formerly Bosanska Gradiska) also one mosque is being built, as well as one in Novi Grad (formerly Bosanski Novi).'

'When there is no politicisation, the situation is calm and normal,' Antelj continued, 'therefore we have decided to issue permits for two new mosque building projects, in Prnjavor and in Mrkonjic Grad.'

Antelj expects the Muslim-Croat Federation to follow the new policy of the RS government and allow reconstruction of several Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries. 'For more than four months we have been waiting to hear from Federation representatives about our request to rebuild the Zitomislic monastery, just south of Mostar, but with no response so far,' he reported. 'They have expressed a verbal readiness to allow rebuilding of Orthodox holy sites, but we have seen no support to the words yet. We are also planning to rebuild the Orthodox cathedral in Mostar, but this will await the decision of the Serbian Orthodox Church.' (END)