

SERBIA: CATHOLIC OFFICE IS LATEST TARGET OF ATTACKS

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 19 March 2002

A Catholic parish office in the town of Sremska Mitrovica, 65 kilometres (40 miles) west of Belgrade, was attacked in the night of 8/9 March, the latest target in a series of incidents that have also seen Adventist, Methodist and Nazarene churches attacked by unknown people. This is the second incident against Catholics in the last month, but Church officials were relieved that no-one was injured. "We are especially worried that in the last three weeks there have been repeated attacks on the priesthood and property of the Roman Catholic church in Srem," declared Rasim Ljajic, federal minister for national and ethnic minorities. The Serbian ministry for religion affairs issued a short statement condemning these attacks: "These constitute attacks on the harmony of society."

"Some people jumped across the church wall into the yard, approached the priest's car, broke the rear window and lights, and tried to extract some petrol but failed," Father Zvonko Blasko, spokesperson of the Yugoslav Catholic Bishop's Conference told Keston in Belgrade on 15 March. "Then they smashed the parish office window with a bottle containing liquid that smelled like petrol, though a fire did not break out."

He reported that there had been no previous threats, except for an incident on 17 February, when vulgar words were written on the church wall. [This time, though, they wrote on the school wall across the street: 'Our mothers will again give birth to new Mladics and Karadzics.'" (SFOR troops in Bosnia and Herzegovina have recently intensified their search in an attempt to arrest General Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic, Bosnian Serb politicians indicted by the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague for their role in the Bosnian civil war.)

"Incidents like this are very harmful to all citizens of the multicultural and multiethnic environment in [the province of] Vojvodina and Yugoslav society," the federal ministry for national and ethnic minorities told Keston in a statement. [We call on the authorities to investigate this case in order to identify the perpetrators." In addition to the statement, the minister Ljajic visited the local priest, Father Eduard Spanovic, the next day.

"We are grateful to the city officials who condemned this act," Father Blasko declared. "The reaction from the local police was an encouragement to the believers and to the priest himself. They promised more patrols and to take better care of the church. Further more, Father Spanovic received many telephone calls from his Serbian neighbours who expressed their condemnation of the attack."

The Serbian Ministry of Religion also condemned the attack. "Interreligious tolerance makes a valuable continuity in Serbia," an 11 March statement declared, [and the Catholic Church, along with other churches and religious communities, represents one of the most important factors of internal harmony and integrity of our society."

"The local priest, Father Spanovic stated that he regrets what happened," Father Blasko added, "but that this is an act of a small group of irresponsible individuals. The extreme nationalists are trying to intimidate the non-Serbian population in order to manipulate their fear."

Over the past month several similar incidents have been reported in Serbia. In the week of 27 February to 2 March, the Seventh Day Adventist church in Belgrade suffered several broken windows, while on 4 March a group of young people verbally abused Adventists and tried to prevent them leaving their church after a service. The next day police came to intervene.

On one night that same week, three churches in the town of Nova Pazova just north of Belgrade the Adventist, Methodist and Nazarene churches - suffered broken windows and had graffiti labelling them as sects written on their walls.

"There are several interconnected processes underway," Sonja Biserko, president of the Serbian Helsinki Board for Human Rights, told Keston on 19 March in Belgrade. "Attacks on smaller churches and religious communities are becoming more intense again and probably for a variety of reasons. Here we have a wave of xenophobia and anti-Western sentiment. This represents an attempt to place one dominant religious group above all others, with some respect accorded to the Catholics, the Muslims and the Jews. But for all others - they are in most cases condemned as sects." She likened the current wave of attacks to those several years ago, when the rise of Serbian nationalism saw the Serbian Orthodox Church gaining a prominent role in society

The local police have registered these attacks on religious minorities, but so far state officials have issued no statements. No-one has yet been identified as the culprit or indicted. (END)