

SERBIA: Further Attacks On Pentecostals

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 1 November 2001

Three young men attacked the Shalom Christian Centre in Backa Palanka, 20 km (12.5 miles) west of Novi Sad in Serbia's northern province of Vojvodina, during the night of 22-23 October, spraying graffiti on the walls, centre director Pastor Jan Demiter, of the UPCI (United Pentecostal Church International) denomination, told Keston News Service on 28 October, in a written statement. They were detained by local police but released an hour later, returning to break windows and doors at the centre - which is also Pastor Demiter's home - and threatening to throw a hand grenade inside if he did not leave 'Serbian land'. They also defaced the nearby Seventh Day Adventist building with graffiti. The local police confirmed to Keston that it has filed criminal charges against the men, and the Belgrade-based Humanitarian Law Centre issued a strong condemnation of the incidents.

'These same young men, hiding behind the Radical Party and Orthodoxy, also organised an attack on us in July, when two buses were stoned and they threatened to throw me out of the city,' Pastor Demiter told Keston. 'One of our guests, Milos Bajac from Despotovo, was seriously injured, when someone crushed his skull at the same incident with a stone. He had to be operated on immediately in order for his life to be saved. This all happened during the international Christian conference in Backa Palanka, in front of our delegates. The young hooligans burned our stands, materials, books, music tapes and other things.'

'It is true that black graffiti was sprayed at the Christian centre and at the Adventist church,' local police chief Nenad Avramovic told Keston on 1 November, 'and we have detained three young men. After an interview they were released. The police have filed criminal charges against them for damaging and destruction of private property. Also, we have identified the perpetrators of the July incident when the Christian centre organised their conference, and we have also filed criminal charges. At that time the Adventist Church was attacked also.' He said it was possible that the same persons involved in October were involved in a larger group of people in July, but believed that they were not the same people charged in July.

'Because the Pentecostal centre and the Adventist church are in the very centre of our city, we do not have any special control being implemented. Our patrols regularly circle the area - likewise the municipality building or some other buildings and installations, all in accordance with the general security measures we employ in Backa Palanka.'

'I am not so much against graffiti,' Demiter told Keston, 'but behind it is a "spirit" containing an instinct of hatred and destruction, threatening to liquidate those who do not think the same way. We simply ask for freedom of religion and recognition of small religious communities, and we hope it will be regulated with this new religious law coming.'

'Pastor Demiter was in my office two days ago,' reported police chief Avramovic 'and we spoke for an hour. We do not have any problems with his religious community at all.'

A Belgrade-based human rights group, the Humanitarian Law Centre, issued a statement on 24 October drawing attention to the mounting religious intolerance in Serbia: 'It is the duty of the state to prevent all actions by individuals or groups that incite ethnic, racial or religious hate, and to punish acts of violence and intimidation motivated by religious intolerance.' No state agency or ministry has so far responded with any public statements regarding the incidents the Centre listed in its statement. (END)