

KOSOVO: UN AUTHORITIES FAILING TO ASSIST ISLAMIC COMMUNITY?

by Geraldine Fagan and Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 26 November 2001

Two hundred and eighteen of some 500 mosques were destroyed by Serb military and paramilitary forces between February 1998 and June 1999, according to "Serbian Barbarities Against Islamic Monuments in Kosovo", a 2000 publication by Kosovo's Islamic community. Despite some assistance in mosque reconstruction from international agencies, secretary to Grand Mufti Rexhep Boja, Xhabir Hamiti, told Keston News Service in Pristina on 25 October that "that is only buildings. No one is rebuilding our Islamic community."

A May 2001 report for UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) proposes allocating funding for the restoration of four pre-eighteenth-century mosques in Kosovo, and two out of a further five mosques mentioned in the report - fifteenth-century Bajzakli Mosque in Pec (Peja in Albanian) and sixteenth-century Hadumi Mosque in Djakovica (Gjakova) - are to be restored with Italian and US funding respectively. Nevertheless, Hamiti told Keston, only ten mosques have been built or rebuilt in Kosovo since the civil war. Progress is slow, he explained, since the UNMIK authorities have yet to set up a property commission to deal with such issues.

Travelling the breadth of Kosovo on 25 October, Keston indeed observed only a handful of rural mosques, while those prominent in major towns appeared not to be new. Speaking to Keston on 24 October in Belgrade, however, Brian Erickson, liaison officer in Gnjilane (Gjilan) for the United Methodist Committee on Relief, commented that new mosques had been "going up left, right and centre" in the western part of the province. Assistant to Abbot Teodosije of Decani Monastery, Fr Sava (Janjic), also remarked on 26 October that a Saudi Arabian organisation, Al-Haramain, was building several mosques in the Decani area.

Interviewed by Keston on 26 October, Bob Charmbury, UNMIK deputy head of Pec regional administration, was able to state only that four mosques had been restored in Pec region (which includes Decani), while a new mosque in Decani town had been funded by Brunei. Charmbury added that another Muslim country - he said that he could not remember which - was proposing to renovate a further 29 mosques.

Although Charmbury admitted that building permission had previously been dealt with by the UN authorities "in a non-formalised way," he said that a property department - the "Reconciliation and Reintegration Unit" - was about to be set up in the province. Keston encountered substantial criticism from various quarters in Kosovo of what is seen as a lack of monitoring of mosque construction aid by the UN authorities. Andreas Szolgyemi, adviser to the OSCE on religious issues in Kosovo and now approaching the end of a mandatory six months' sabbatical, commented that although Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates had given aid for mosque reconstruction, the local Islamic community in particular were "very dissatisfied" with it. Speaking by telephone from Hungary on 16 November, Szolgyemi explained that Kosovar Muslims worshipped in ornate, Turkish-style mosques rather than the spartan surroundings of some other Islamic cultures, and thus had "very different ideas" concerning mosque decoration from the Saudis, "who are Wahhabi".

Able to comment only on the new mosque in Decani funded by Brunei, Charmbury assured Keston that it had been built in consultation with the local imam. In the case of the sixteenth-century Hadumi Mosque in Djakovica, however, according to a January 2001 report on

religion by the International Crisis Group for the OSCE, "the Institution for Protection of Kosova Monuments reported that Saudi Joint Relief Committee for Kosovo (SJRC) representatives authorised to reconstruct [the mosque] attempted to destroy grave markers in its cemetery and later began to wreck the remains of the structure." On 5 August 2000, continues the report, provincial authorities in the form of the Kosovo Interim Administrative Council Cultural Department announced that they had "barred further involvement of SJRC in the rehabilitation of the mosque."

On 25 October Keston observed the large-scale construction on a prominent site in Pristina of the King Fahd Cultural Centre and Mosque. Although Saudi Arabia collected money for Kosovar Muslims during the civil war, complained Hamiti, it was now being spent on this centre, "which is not for us - local Muslims are not involved." According to Hamiti, the Centre will promote Saudi culture with its own students, having been built "without any liaison with us - only the municipality." How had such a development come about, asked Keston? "This is the Balkans," replied Hamiti, "if you give money, anything is possible."
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