

## **SERBIA: Vishnu Community Denied Right to Reply**

**by Branko Bjelajac and Felix Corley, Keston News Service, 30 July 2001**

Despite repeated attempts, Keston News Service has been unable to gain responses from two of Serbia's leading media organisations to charges levelled by the local Vishnu faith community that they have been unable to gain the right to reply to what they regard as slanderous coverage of their community. Bozidar Nikolic, editor of Serbian state television RTS, and Vojislav Tufegdzcic, editor of the Belgrade daily paper Blic, failed to respond to Keston's written questions sent to each on two separate occasions over the past month. Neither was available by telephone on any of the times Keston called and no-one else either at RTS or Blic was prepared to tell Keston why they had not been prepared even to discuss complaints about specific coverage with the Vishnu community, why they had refused the Vishnu community the right to reply and what policy each had laid down as editor about coverage of the activity of religious minorities.

'There is a media blockade of small religious communities in Serbia,' Atmabhu, a spokesman for the Yugoslav Vishnu Faith Community Veda, told Keston in Belgrade on 25 June. 'The situation is just becoming unbearable.' Atmabhu, a Yugoslav national who prefers his family name not be used, complained that his community is being denied the right to reply to 'an orchestrated media hate campaign against us' after a rash of what he claims are inaccurate and often slanderous newspaper and television features about his community. 'We do not know why this campaign is underway and public sentiment is going from bad to worse.'

Filip Mladenovic, a member of the board of the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia, told Keston such a campaign was underway, adding that it reflected the mood in society. 'The media in Serbia are only following popular sentiment, in its rising nationalism and xenophobia.' The chairman of another leading media freedom organisation in Belgrade, while also admitting privately that such a campaign existed, and deploring it, declined to make any on-the-record comment.

Atmabhu reported an article in Blic in May about a man in the city of Nis who committed suicide. 'The article claimed he was our long-standing member and indicated that this might be the reason for what he did, as his parents asserted. Following this very disturbing news, we contacted our members in the area and discovered that this young man had never been our member. He only acquired a couple of our books. We heard that he was under medical treatment in the local psychiatric hospital.' Atmabhu reported that the Vishnu community contacted editor Tufegdzcic, asking for an opportunity to explain this and to stress that the faith opposed suicide. 'The editor was kind but adamant that he would not let us deny what had been stated about us in his article. So, public damage was done to us again and we were unable to respond and deny what had been reported.'

Atmabhu had even less success with RTS. 'RTS is broadcasting a serial of one-hour long programmes every Friday night where they attack many small religious communities,' Atmabhu continued. 'We were their target in two programmes at the end of February. About three years ago, their crew came to our meeting and very kindly asked to record our meeting and talk to our members. We agreed. But the programme they produced was a perversion of the truth. They twisted what our members said, took statements out of context and made us look very bad. What they showed in their programmes is not who we are.'

Atmabhu said he tried to see editor Nikolic, but his secretary never even let him speak with him. 'They have been avoiding us for months, giving all kinds of excuses, from a sick child to a business trip.' In May the community faxed an open letter to his office, asking for the right to reply, but received no answer. 'They spent almost two hours of their programme accusing us of various lies, and now even the editor is not available for months. How are we to achieve our legal rights?'

He cited another programme broadcast early in the year on a different state TV channel, RTNS, in the northern province of Vojvodina which invited two 'deprogrammers', Zoran Lukovic and Alexander Senic, to a discussion on 'religious sects'. 'They told very many lies about us and our religion and philosophy.' No community members were invited onto the programme. 'We tried to react to this act of public violence. I was not permitted to even see the editor, the guard in front of the building stopped me. I spoke on an internal phone to some unidentified person, who said they just recorded what others said, and that if we want to sue them, we should sue those who said it.'

Mladenovic views the attacks on minority faiths as part of the nationalist mood. 'Nationalism has brought us to this point of increased xenophobia,' he declared. 'The media coverage of so-called "sects" is just the continuation of the same agenda.' He told Keston his association is 'open to help' and is inviting Veda representatives to approach us with their problems. 'We will contact the media editors in question and use our position and authority to seek redress.'  
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