

## BOSNIA: PRE-FEAST ATTACK ON MUSLIM CENTRE

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 6 December 2002

During the night of 3/4 December, just ahead of the feast of Id al-Fitr (Ramazan Bayram) at the close of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, an explosive device was thrown at the building of the Muslim Religious Community in Prijedor in the north west of the Serbian part of Bosnia, Republika Srpska, Keston News Service has learnt. No one was injured and no perpetrators have been arrested. The detonation destroyed the balcony and the wooden floor in the building that is used for prayer meetings, and also by a hodza Sejfudin Hodzic.

According to the SRNA news agency, an investigative judge of the Prijedor main court, Milomir Popovic, estimated the material damage at 1,500 Euros (1,502 US dollars or 956 British pounds).

Human rights groups have criticised what they regard as the inadequate response to such continuing attacks on Muslim sites by the Republika Srpska authorities.

A public appeal issued on 4 December, sent to Keston from the Bijeljina office of the Helsinki Committee in Republika Srpska, regrets the "inadequate" silence of the local authorities in the north eastern town of Bijeljina, who failed to congratulate its Muslim citizens on the Ramazan Bayram festival and on the start of rebuild work on several mosques in the city, or to condemn recent attacks.

"Establishing normal conditions for freedom of religion is one of the core human rights, but at the same time a question of mutual civilisational and cultural heritage in Bosnia and Herzegovina," the Helsinki Committee declared. "It is very important to separate politics from religion, and for politicians to stop manipulating the religious sentiment of citizens, as equally for religious leaders to abstain from interference in politics."

Republika Srpska has witnessed numerous attacks on Muslim sites in the past few years, almost all of which have gone unpunished. Attempts to rebuild mosques destroyed during Bosnia's bitter civil war in the 1990s have often been obstructed by Serbian hardliners. An attempt to lay the foundation stone for the rebuilding of the Ferhadija mosque in Banja Luka had to be abandoned in May 2001 in the wake of violence from local Serbs. It was finally laid the following month (see KNS 19 June 2001).

One of the most devastating attacks came last September. Just three months after it was rebuilt and reopened for worship, a mosque in the Serbian-populated village of Kljuc in Gacko municipality in eastern Herzegovina some 50 kilometres (30 miles) south of Sarajevo was attacked. An explosive device destroyed the minaret and damaged the roof and windows of the mosque late on 18 September. No injuries were reported. It is not known who carried out the attack.

Both the prime minister of Republika Srpska and the mayor of Gacko expressed their regrets over the attack, asking the police to bring the perpetrators of this act of vandalism to justice. The interior minister of Republika Srpska, Dragomir Jovovic,

told a press conference that he had used his authority to take measures to discover the perpetrators of this "act of vandalism". The Ministry of Religion of the Republika Srpska also condemned the attack, expressing the hope that the perpetrators would be apprehended.

Muslim-Croat Federation officials joined in the condemnation. Federation prime minister Alija Behmen called it a "terrorist" attack and "a severe blow to the return of refugees and to the revival of unity in our country". However, as in many other cases of attacks on mosques in Republika Srpska, the authorities have taken little action to punish the perpetrators of the Kljuc attack.

"To our knowledge, there have been no arrests of those who attacked and still attack Muslim religious sites in Republika Srpska," Kasim Mujicic, the newly elected president of the Muslim Faith Community in Banja Luka, told Keston on 5 December. "So far there has been only a trial of those who disturbed 'the public peace' at the Ferhadija rebuilding celebration last year."

The Kljuc mosque, one of the oldest Islamic religious sites in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was destroyed by Bosnian Serb soldiers in 1992, along with the Muslim-populated village. The State Commission for Gathering Facts on War Crimes reported that 11 other mosques in Kljuc vicinity were destroyed or set on fire in 1992 alone.

The Kljuc mosque was rebuilt and opened on 8 June this year, after several years of foot-dragging by the unwilling Republika Srpska authorities, the first to be rebuilt in eastern Herzegovina. Present at the reopening ceremony were representatives from the Serbian entity, officials from the cities of Mostar and Dubrovnik, and the Muslim authorities. Kljuc is one of the small Bosniak Muslim returnee communities in Gacko municipality.

The Mostar Islamic Faith Community issued a strongly-worded statement condemning the explosion: "The Fascist hordes with all their insignia, unpunished by the authorities of the so-called Republika Srpska, are rampaging today as they were in 1992, 1995 or 2001," it declared in the 20 September statement. "We invite the international community to stop persecuting the Bosniak Muslims because of alleged suspicion of being terrorists, but to pay attention to true terrorists and stop their terror."

United Nations spokesperson Kristin Haupt told a press conference in Sarajevo on 19 September that the mosque was probably destroyed at 9pm and that this "appears to be the most serious incident in a long period in this area". The United Nations mission, UNMIBH, strongly condemned the deliberate destruction of the newly reconstructed mosque, urging the police in Trebinje to extend all efforts to identify the perpetrators of "this malicious act and bring them to justice".

On 20 September, only two days after the attack in Kljuc, a group of ten Bosnian Serbs entered the building site of a new mosque in the northern town of Prnjavor after an election rally of the Serbian Democratic Party and went on the rampage, according to the BH radio channel 1. This raid went on while Serbian extremists outside threw building material and chanted nationalist slogans. The Prnjavor police intervened and

arrested the group, and launched criminal charges against them. Earlier this year, unknown vandals desecrated several tombstones at the Muslim graveyard in Prnjavor, but they have never been identified.

"Groups and individuals who, during the night, destroy religious objects show their primitivism, barbarism and hatred against people of different religious groups - and at the same time show disrespect to their own nation and religion," the Helsinki Committee declared. It warned the public and the government of Republika Srpska that there are those who are against multiethnic tolerance and against the return of refugees and the displaced. (END)