

## **BOSNIA: Violent Riots at Future Mosque Sites**

**by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 8 May 2001**

Thirty people were injured and 19 buses and police cars were damaged by fire in Banja Luka on 7 May as ethnic Serb rioters disrupted the ceremony to lay the foundation stone of the city's Ferhadija mosque. The riot followed a similar attack on 5 May in the city of Trebinje - also in Republika Srpska (RS), the Serbian entity of Bosnia - at the site where the foundation stone of the future mosque was to be laid. Large groups of Serbian nationalists appeared at both sites to launch riots which Muslim officials believe were orchestrated, though a representative of the RS police denied this to Keston News Service (see separate KNS article). The RS police and ministry of religion condemned the 'offenders' and 'deeply regretted' the incidents. The Banja Luka chief of police and the RS interior minister offered their resignations. The RS government issued a statement pledging that the perpetrators would be arrested and prosecuted.

Planned for the beginning of May was the ceremonial launch of several sacred building projects in Bosnia. Rebuilding or renovation work was due to begin on two large mosques, in Trebinje and Banja Luka, the Orthodox cathedral and the synagogue in Mostar, and Catholic churches in several cities.

When guests and representatives of the Islamic Faith Community (IFC) of Bosnia and Herzegovina arrived on 5 May at the site of the future Osman-pasha mosque in Trebinje they were attacked by ethnic Serbian demonstrators. Local police intervened, but were unable to prevent the attacks. Several people suffered light injuries including Daniel Ruis, head of the local office of the United Nations High Representative. Some demonstrators burned the IFC flag and that others sang songs praising Radovan Karadzic, the former Bosnian Serb leader and indicted war criminal.

The RS government in its statement of 5 May declared that 'it is not acceptable that the renewal of some religious objects should be politically misused, and that by this unnecessary tensions are created'.

However, Muslim leader Reis-ul-ulema Efendi Mustafa Ceric was unimpressed by the response of the RS authorities. 'It is obvious this violent act preventing us expressing our religious freedom was planned, organised and maliciously implemented,' he declared in a 6 May statement.

'We have identified some of the people responsible for this incident and some have already been arrested,' Zoran Glusac, head of the information bureau of the RS Ministry of Interior, told Keston on 8 May by telephone from Banja Luka. 'Please understand that in the interest of the investigation I cannot tell you any names, but we will take legal measures against them. We are still working to clarify the whole situation, for we believe it is not as simple as it looks at first sight. The ministry has formed a team of experts to discover any eventual mistakes concerning the police side of the incident.'

On 7 May, similar attacks took place in Banja Luka at the ceremony to lay the foundation stone for the reconstruction of the town's Ferhadija mosque, eight years to the day after it was dynamited and destroyed. After two years of foot-dragging, the local authorities approved its

rebuilding (see KNS 9 April 2001). When Muslim representatives arrived at the site, several hundred demonstrators managed to break through the police cordon and again burned the IFC flag. They then set several buses and cars on fire and prevented the fire brigade from reaching the scene. They also threw stones, eggs and other objects at the Muslims and guests, who were forced to take refuge in the neighbouring Islamic high school until the evening, when SFOR (Stabilisation Force) units and RS police cleared the area. Among the guests were the UN Chief of Mission for BH Jacques Klein, the United States and United Kingdom ambassadors, and the regional officers for international agencies in Banja Luka. Of those injured 19 were Muslims and 11 Serbs, 4 of whom were police officers.

RS government officials and the RS president, Mirko Sarovic, came to the scene and spoke to the crowd trying to calm the situation. After the people dispersed the RS government held an emergency session.

The RS government 'energetically condemned' the Banja Luka riot, and the prime minister said he would decide on whether to accept the resignations after analysing what happened. The RS government instructed the Interior Ministry to identify and arrest the riot organisers. 'What happened in Banja Luka and several days ago in Trebinje, does not support what the RS government has started.' The RS government asked all sides and the representatives of the international community to 'work to calm and not to raise tensions'. (END)