

## **BOSNIA: Who Was Behind the Anti-mosque Riots?**

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

While officials of the Republika Srpska (RS), the Serbian entity of Bosnia, deny in public that there is any proof that the attacks on the ceremonies to lay the foundation stones to rebuild two mosques destroyed in the Bosnian war - on 5 May in Trebinje and 7 May in Banja Luka - were pre-planned and linked (see separate KNS article), Muslim leaders, international officials and other sources assert that they were.

One source from Bosnia who did not want to be named told Keston News Service 'the RS government believes those two incidents were organised and orchestrated'. According to the source, police believe one person arrested in connection with the riot in Trebinje might lead them to the 'ideologists' behind the protests. 'Everyone thinks this is all connected to the group supporting [former Bosnian Serb leader] Radovan Karadzic and his militant ways.'

On 8 May the Belgrade daily paper Glas javnosti published what it claimed was the text of an A4 leaflet in Cyrillic distributed to passers-by in the centre of Banja Luka in the morning of 7 May: 'Serbian brothers, our city will be attacked today by the Islamic hordes with the help of the criminals from Austro-Hungary, and again they will try to cast the seed of Islam in our city. Come at 11 am to the plateau where Ferhadija once was and with your presence express your dissatisfaction with this event.'

In his condemnation of the attacks, OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Romanian Foreign Minister Mircea Geoana, spoke of 'this apparently orchestrated violence in Banja Luka and Trebinje'. He maintained that the attacks were 'directed against the very ideals of ethnic tolerance and peaceful coexistence - ideals that the international community has been working so hard to foster in this country'.

In his 7 May statement from Bucharest, Geoana added that the perpetrators and instigators of this 'mob violence' must be brought to justice. 'Not only the violence against the symbolic revival of Islamic faith, but also the fact that representatives of the international community were targeted and threatened is an insult to all decent citizens of the Bosnian Serb Republic.'

He pointed out that 'freedom of religion has been guaranteed by the Constitution of the Bosnian Serb Republic and it is the responsibility of the police to ensure unhindered exercise of this fundamental freedom, as well as to guarantee the safety of all citizens'.

In its response to the Banja Luka riots, the local police claimed that 'some of the IFC guests behaved rather provocatively', an apparent bid to divide responsibility between 'citizens' (Serbs) and 'guests' (Muslims). 'The centre for public security added 250 more police officers to the initial number of 300 to try to calm the situation,' a statement issued by the police on 7 May declared. 'The Islamic high school was protected by a Special Forces unit.'

Bosnia's Muslim leader Reis-ul-ulema Mustafa Cerić stated at an urgent press conference called on 7 May: 'What happened in Banja Luka cannot be explained otherwise than that Serbian fascism is alive and that one should be very cautious when speaking of democratic achievements in Republika Srpska,' he said in remarks passed to Keston by the Muslim Information and News Agency MINA in Sarajevo. 'I was convinced I would never see such a thing in my life again, after the siege of Sarajevo, but this was worse than grenades because it happened six years later... As long as the Serbian authorities do not identify and adequately punish persons who plan and organise such riots, we have the right to believe that all the Serbs are involved in such incidents.'

However, Zoran Glusac, head of the information bureau of the RS Ministry of Interior, said it was too early to link the two incidents as the investigation is still going on. 'We are working hard to find the perpetrators and those who organised this incident,' he told Keston on 8 May by telephone from Banja Luka. 'We have no evidence these two incidents were orchestrated in any way. At the moment we are treating them as two separate incidents.'

The RS police were keen to show they have been taking action in the wake of the riots. 'The RS Interior Ministry is taking energetic legal measures against the identified perpetrators of criminal activities and obstruction of public peace and order,' declared an official police statement passed to Keston from Banja Luka on 8 May. 'The ministry will also initiate a critical analysis of any eventual mistakes by the police in securing this event.'

Keston tried to contact the RS minister for religion Dusan Antelj in Banja Luka, but despite repeated calls he was not available on 8 May 'due to the continuous meetings he is holding all day because of the situation', as his office told Keston. The RS government claimed that the presence of Antelj and two other RS ministers in the Islamic high school during the Banja Luka riot 'contributed to the calming of the situation'.

However, anti-Muslim violence is continuing. In the evening of 7 May a hand grenade was thrown at the house of the local Muslim leader in Trebinje, Izet Capić. No-one was injured and only the gate to the yard was damaged. RS police declared in a statement that the local and international police visited Capić's home and an investigation has begun. It is believed the attack was connected to the 5 May riots against the mosque reconstruction in the city. (END)