

BOSNIA: BANJA LUKA'S FERHADIJA MOSQUE TO BE REBUILT FIRST

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 9 April 2001

After years of foot-dragging, the urban planning department of the town of Banja Luka in Republika Srpska (the Serbian entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina) agreed on 19 March to issue a permit for the re-building of Ferhadija (Ferhad Pasha's Mosque) in the city centre. Consent was given eighteen months after the House of the Nations court ruled in favour of the local Islamic Faith Community, but the Republika Srpska religion minister dismissed the delay. 'It is true that a year and a half has passed since the court made its decision,' Dusan Antalj told Keston from Banja Luka by telephone on 6 April, 'but it was not easy to complete all the necessary steps.' He pledged that the Bosnian Serb authorities would respect freedom of religion for all. However, none of the other more than a dozen mosques destroyed in the town during the war are likely to be rebuilt soon.

Serb nationalists levelled Ferhadija to the ground with a massive explosion on 7 May 1993 in the middle of the 1992-5 Bosnian war, despite the fact that no fighting took place in the town. In 1996 the town authorities bulldozed the surrounding buildings belonging to the Islamic community. With no mosque, the town's 5,500 Muslims currently have to meet for prayer in the old house of the mufti.

Banja Luka's mufti, Edhem Camdzic, believes it will be possible to begin ground works on 7 May, the eighth anniversary of the old mosque's destruction, but is not certain of funding. 'Help has been promised by UNESCO, the Saudi Committee, humanitarian organisations and also the Republika Srpska government. [Bosnian Serb] Prime minister Mladen Ivanic has promised concrete help to the Islamic Faith Community,' Mufti Camdzic told the Bosnian news agency Srna. 'These moves are very much needed for us to live again in multiethnic Bosnia, as it was for centuries. I am convinced Ferhadija will play its role in this.'

Bosnia's top human rights court ruled in June 1999 that the Banja Luka authorities should allow the reconstruction of seven of 15 mosques destroyed there in 1992 and 1993, but the authorities failed to comply. Last November the town authorities allowed the community to use the Ferhadija site, but refused rebuilding permission for a mosque of the same size as the original.

The urban planning department announced that the new mosque should be no taller than 18.2 metres (60 feet). 'The new mosque will be an exact replica of the old one,' Antalj insisted. 'Ferhadija was a cultural and historical monument of the highest importance and, as such, it will be restored.' He linked the reconstruction to similar projects to rebuild the Serbian Orthodox Monastery of Zitomislic near Mostar and the Roman Catholic Church in Derventa. 'They were all destroyed and all will be restored to their previous condition. Now we have mutual agreement and political will, the actual tempo of rebuilding these sacral objects will depend only on the financial abilities of the religious communities.'

However, Banja Luka's Muslims have one last hurdle to overcome. 'We still require the Islamic Faith Community to submit the proper construction plans for final approval to the town's urban department, and also to ensure that Ferhadija will be

reconstructed properly.' Antalj would not commit himself to the rebuilding of other destroyed communal buildings on the site, including several Turkish-style small mausoleums (turbe). `As to the other buildings that existed on the site until 1993, I think we will have to wait a little bit longer to see them again.'

He did not believe the town's majority Serbian population would obstruct the mosque's reconstruction. `I do not anticipate any problems with the population, though this remains to be seen. We will do our best to respect the freedom of religious practice of all of our citizens according to our constitutional requirements and rights.'

The old Ferhadija was built in 1579 by Serbian masons from Dubrovnik and Split, who were executed after the building was completed at the order of Ferhad Pasha, the first Bosnian pasha under Ottoman rule. It is said he did not want them to build anything of such beauty again. (END)

Copyright (c) 2001 Keston Institute. All rights reserved.