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SERBIA: Attack on Christian music concert

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

On the evening of 8 August 2003, during a music concert organised at Vrdnik (90 kilometres or 60 miles north-west of Belgrade) by the local Church of God Pentecostal church and led by a German Pentecostal band from Heidelberg, Forum 18 News Service has learned that the power line was cut by an axe, someone threw a hand grenade near the stage, and after the concert ended one person drove his car in the park where spectators were, threatening organisers that he was armed. No injuries were reported. The police are investigating the incidents, and a Vrdnik city councillor expressed his regrets at these events. "When society does not react at hate speech in the media, and graffiti on church walls, the next things are events like these, which we condemn and ask the state to take measures against the perpetrators", the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia told Forum 18.

"For years now we have organised several week-long youth camps every summer in our camp in Vrdnik", Miroslav Radovanovic, secretary to the Presbytery of the Church of God in Serbia and Montenegro told Forum 18. "Every year, a major event of all the camps has been a public music concert held in the city centre, at the public stage. Every year we have sought permission from the Council, and registered this public gathering with the police with no objections. We had posters put on public announcement posts in advance. More than three hundred young people joined together from Vrdnik, Novi Sad, Belgrade, and the program started."

"One hour later, someone cut our power supply with an axe, using a prepared piece of wood to put beneath a wire, to ensure that it will be cut. The spot was close to buildings, in the dark, so our ushers saw no-one. After we managed to restore the power supply, the concert continued. One hour later, we noticed an explosion that occurred to the right of us, across the road. People felt leaves and small branches were falling on them, but we paid no attention, and the concert did not stop. Some people left however. Only half an hour later, when we were gathering the equipment, we realised that it was a serious attack. We went closer and could smell gunpowder in the air, two cars were damaged, and people collected two handfuls of metal pieces that had flown all around us."

"We called the police, they came, but they could do nothing except to register that there were no injured people, and that someone threw a grenade across a small river, and escaped between two houses. However the following morning, another police team came found the serial number of the hand grenade. Their first assessment was that it is a shock-bomb, designed to shock and blast people, three times stronger than a regular hand grenade."

The music concert was staged by a youth music band from a Pentecostal church in Germany, the Heidelberg-Leimen Gemeinde Gottes e.V in Germany. Their team at the Vrdnik camp numbered eleven people, but at the stage they had five musicians. They felt the blast more strongly than others.

"The next day, a city councillor came to us to express his regret at this incident", Dragan Radovanovic, local Church of God pastor and a camp director told Forum 18. "I understand that this is not very good for the image of a town that plans to develop its tourism economy. But, our problems did not end that evening with the bomb blast. When young people left after the concert, and we started to collect our PA system and instruments, an angry man started to drive his car in the park, yelling at us and asking for trouble. We called the police again, but this time they were reluctant to come. After some harassment, this person left us in total disarray."

"I went to the police chief on Monday 11 August", Dragan Radovanovic continued, "to be assured there that the police is launching a criminal investigation about the event, and that they will, most probably, file a criminal charges against an unknown person for the bomb attack. I think that police are showing a little bit more interest now, when they realised that media is also going to report on all

this."

The Vrdnik Church of God this year organised five youth camps, with a total of 300 participants from all around Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia. They often host foreign visitors, like the German youth group. At the concert, there were about 80 camp participants.

"We think that anti-war and anti-western sentiment is almost over, but that nationalism did not stop along with it in Serbia," Seska Stanojlovic, vice-president of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, told Forum 18. "After the democratic changes in October 2000, there was no further development in this area, except nationalism, which is the root of many problems today. We still have hate speech and incidents like these. Unfortunately, religious minorities have an exposed position, because they are, in most cases, the first to be attacked. This is very serious when it happens in Vojvodina, which is a multinational, multicultural and multiconfessional region. We have to react every time an incident occurs, every single time. When society does not react to hate speech in the media, graffiti on the church walls, and other things, the next things are events like these, which we condemn and ask the state to take measures against the perpetrators."

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