

3 December 2008

SERBIA: Violent attacks continuing, but mainly declining

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The latest Forum 18 News Service survey of violent attacks against Serbia's religious communities – covering September 2007 to October 2008 – indicates that fewer attacks are taking place compared to previous years. As previously, most physical attacks have been on Seventh-day Adventist and Jehovah's Witnesses properties, and attacks on Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as Mormons) properties have risen. As in earlier years, a number of Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries have also suffered attacks. Dragan Novakovic, the Deputy Religion Minister, told Forum 18 that the police and judicial authorities do not provide his Ministry with adequate information. Novakovic also regretted that attackers are usually charged with violating public order, instead of - where appropriate - the more serious charge of inciting or exacerbating national, racial, or religious hatred – which carries higher penalties than public order charges. Novakovic told Forum 18 that the Ministry is determined to reduce attacks. "We will need years to get it down to an acceptable level, but we are determined to do it."

The latest Forum 18 News Service survey of violent attacks on Serbia's religious communities and their members – covering September 2007 to October 2008 – seems to indicate that fewer attacks are now taking place overall, especially compared to the years up to about 2006. As in previous years, most physical attacks on religious communities in Serbia in 2008 have been against the Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, and the numbers of attacks on properties of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as Mormons) has risen, Forum 18 has found. As in previous years, there have also been a number of attacks on Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries.

Serbia's desire to join the European Union, along with politicians placing greater weight on Serbia becoming a more open country, appears to be influencing popular attitudes, and hence the possibility of attacks. The current government under Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic is seen as pro-European and does not see all that is not Serbian or Orthodox as automatically anti-Serbian. Example of these changes in social attitudes were seen in media reporting of attacks which took place on the night of 21 February 2008, during rioting which followed a government-organised demonstration against Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence. Media reports in 2008 have been notably less hostile to religious minorities, and less prone to describe them as "dangerous sects".

However, many members of Serbian religious minorities have complained to Forum 18 that they still suffer discrimination from officials, as a result of hostility in society. No non-Christian religious communities other than those recognised as traditional – Jews and Muslims – have been registered under the Religion Law (see eg. F18News 8 January 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1072). Complaints are also made that religion classes in schools give children negative impressions of members of minority communities. They also complain that in court – including in child custody cases – religious minority members sometimes face discrimination.

Many of the attacks and threats against religious minority communities are by extreme nationalists who think that the communities are in some sense traitors to the nation. An attack on the Evangelical (Pentecostal) Church in Kraljevo on 21 February was carried out by a nationalist organisation Obraz. A hand-written threat to the same church in September was issued by a group calling itself Black Hand, a reference to an early twentieth century Serbian secret nationalist society. It is unknown whether the threat actually comes from an existing secret group, or whether the name is merely being invoked as part of the threat.

Dragan Novakovic, Serbia's Deputy Religion Minister, welcomed the apparent fall in the number of religiously-motivated attacks. "It often depends which glasses you look through," he told Forum 18 in Belgrade on 26 November. "When someone has a problem they see it through each individual attack. But when we look generally we can see that the trend is for fewer and fewer attacks."

However, Novakovic lamented that his Ministry does not have "full insight" into the attacks, knowing only of those that religious communities inform it of. "Unfortunately the police don't inform us of these attacks," he told Forum 18, "even though it would be useful for analytical purposes. Still less do the judicial authorities inform us of cases underway – they have no duty to do so."

Novakovic also regretted that those who attack religious communities are usually charged with violating public peace and order. He would, where appropriate, like more serious charges such as instigating or exacerbating national, racial, and religious hatred to be also brought. Under Article 317 of the Serbian Criminal Code, which specifically covers such hate-motivated attacks on both persons and property, this can result in mandatory jail terms of between one and eight years.

Under Article 131 of the Criminal Code, "violating freedom of religion and the performance of religious services", conviction can result in imprisonment of up to one year. In the case of convicted officials, a jail term of up to three years can be imposed for this offence.

In contrast, the penalties for public order charges are minor. These charges are normally used to punish fights between two people, or playing loud music in public.

Deputy Religion Minister Novakovic insisted that the Religion Ministry is determined to see the number of violent attacks on religious communities reduced. "If this year or next we reduced the level of attacks by three or five percent, it would be very important and we would be very happy," he told Forum 18. "We will need years to get it down to an acceptable level, but we are determined to do it."

The Ministry of Justice has not answered questions on why it does not supply data to the Religion Ministry, or why serious charges are not brought against alleged attackers, despite several attempts by Forum 18 to discuss this with the Justice Ministry.

The largest number of attacks in a short time period took place at a time of large-scale government-organised demonstrations in Belgrade on 21 February 2008 against Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence. Foreign embassies and businesses were attacked, as were religious minority communities, including Protestants such as Adventists, as well as Mormons. This may be because these religious communities have their main headquarters in the United States.

Forum 18 notes that many of the same places of worship have been attacked time after time. For example, the Evangelical (Pentecostal) Church in Kraljevo attacked in February 2008 was attacked with Molotov cocktails in December 2006. Police found no evidence to enable a criminal case to be brought after the Molotov cocktail attack. Graffiti was daubed on the same church in September 2007 (see F18News 9 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1030).

Although most of the attacks have been relatively low-level, their frequency has left many members of religious minorities feeling afraid. Windows on the rented building where an Adventist church in the western town of Uzice met, and their pastor also lived, were broken three times in March 2008, and three times in April. Following this, Pastor Danilo Zelenkavic told Forum 18, Church leaders decided to move him from the town for his own safety. Church members now have to travel 25 kms (15 miles) to Zlatibor to attend worship services in a chapel in a church-owned holiday house.

At the same time, Adventist Pastor Dalibor Trajkovic told Forum 18 from the central town of Kragujevac that his church has frequently been stoned or had graffiti daubed on the walls. But he adds that knocking on the church door or windows during the night and yelling "This is Serbia, Sabbath-keepers get out" or "Sectarians get out" has also become common. He said that although they are concerned by such lesser harassment, they no longer bother to notify the police, reporting only more serious damage. The church is located on the corner of a street, making it easier to attack.

When members of religious minorities attempt to share their beliefs, this can spark hostility. In the town of Bor in eastern Serbia, local people in June 2008 tried to prevent construction of a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall with a petition and blocking of roads. The organiser of the protest told the Serbian daily newspaper Blic on 8 June: "We do not have anything against the Jehovah's Witnesses, but we do not want them in our neighbourhood".

However, local people can sometimes intervene in defence of religious minorities. This happened in March 2008, when neighbours of a Jehovah's Witness meeting in Bajna Basta protected those attending a service from attack by a mob of some 500 people.

Those responsible for attacks are often not identified by the police and prosecuted, Forum 18 notes (see eg. F18News 7 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1083). Even when the attackers are caught, they often – as Deputy Religion Minister Novakovic lamented – face only minor charges, if any. The charge made is typically disturbing public order.

Forum 18 knows of only a few cases where prosecutions with the possibility of the serious penalties provided under Article 317, "instigating or exacerbating national, racial and religious hatred," have been brought. The most recent instance has been following the arrest of three people for daubing graffiti in July 2008 on a Catholic church in Pancevo. It may be significant that Pancevo is in the northern province of Vojvodina, as prosecutions for those who attack religious communities are more likely in Vojvodina. This is the most multi-ethnic and multi-religious part of Serbia.

As in previous years (see F18News 9 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1030), religious communities are sometimes reluctant to report attacks to the police or make them publicly known.

The information in the survey is unavoidably incomplete, due to continuing deficiencies in the publicly available data, so no attempt has been made to statistically compare data over the years. But the information has been gathered from as wide a range of sources as possible, including religious communities themselves, human rights groups, official information and the Serbian media. The list below of incidents between September 2007 and October 2008 does not include incidents in Kosovo. All incidents where no source

is indicated are incidents known to Forum 18 directly.

ATTACKS FROM SEPTEMBER - DECEMBER 2007

September – Windows of the Adventist Church in Kragujevac stoned, the exact date being unclear.

18 September – Windows of the Mormon Church in Novi Sad broken.

2 October – Fence around Mormon Church in Novi Sad burned.

22 October – Adventist church windows in Backa Palanka broken. The attacker was arrested by police and charged (B92)

28 November – Middle-aged man physically attacked three female Jehovah's Witnesses and took their literature in Arandjelovac.

ATTACKS FROM JANUARY – OCTOBER 2008

24 January – Graffiti daubed on Adventist Church in Negotin.

25 January – Graffiti daubed on Adventist Church in Belgrade.

26 January – Two young men in Vranjska Banja attacked three teenage female Jehovah's Witnesses and tried to rape them. The attackers were identified and a prosecution has begun.

17 February – Windows of the Adventist Theological Seminary in Belgrade broken.

20/21 February - Two windows of the Mormon Church in Belgrade broken at time of riots against Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence.

21 February - Windows on Adventist Church in Nis broken.

21 February – The neo-Nazi organisation Obraz attacked the Evangelical (Pentecostal) Church in Kraljevo, after the evening church service. Stones and eggs were thrown at the church and windows broken.

During February, one person broke into and stole icons and liturgy books from the Serbian Orthodox churches of the Birth of the Most Holy Virgin in Sremska Kamenica, the Three Holy Hierarchs in Kisac, the St. Sava Church in Cerevic and the Monastery of the Holy Archangel in Kovilj. He was arrested in early March (Vecernje Novosti)

8/9, 10/11 and 21/22 March – Windows of a building in Uzice rented by Adventists as a church and home for their pastor stoned in the early morning.

22 March - During a Jehovah's Witness service of the memorial of Christ's death (the most important service in the year for this religion), in Bajna Basta, a crowd of about 500 people from Bajna Basta, as well as from Uzice and the neighbouring Republika Srpska in Bosnia, stoned a private house where the service was happening. About 20 people who attended, including several children, were brought to safety with the help of the neighbours. Some of attackers were identified, but no one has been prosecuted.

2 April - Two older Jehovah's Witnesses were attacked in Klenak during door-to-door service. Literature was taken. Attacker was identified and prosecution begun.

12/13, 18/19 and 25/26 April - Windows at Adventist church and pastor's home in Uzice again stoned in early hours of the morning. As a result of the attacks, Adventists moved pastor from town, told to Forum 18 pastor Danilo Zelenkapić.

17 May - Two windows of the Mormon Church in Novi Sad were broken.

5 June - Main door of the Adventist Church in Jagodina broken.

6 June - In the town of Bor in eastern Serbia, local people in June 2008 tried to prevent construction of a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall with a petition and blocking of roads. The organiser of the protest told the Serbian daily newspaper Blic on 8 June: "We do not have anything against the Jehovah's Witnesses, but we do not want them in our neighbourhood".

7/8 June - Neo-Nazi graffiti and messages about Jehovah's Witnesses was daubed on the Kingdom Hall in Sremska Mitrovica.

8/9 June - Five windows of the Mormon Church in Novi Sad broken.

11 June – Four windows, including a stained-glass window, of the Mormon Church in Novi Sad broken.

11 June - Three unidentified young men attacked a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall close to the Auto Komanda Bridge in Belgrade. While the building was being stoned one stone hit a Jehovah's Witness man in the stomach. Police were called.

19 June – Gold items stolen from the Church of the Birth of the Most Holy Virgin Serbian Orthodox Church in Sremska Kamenica, near Novi Sad. (RTV)

26 June - Entrance doors of the Adventist Church in Jagodina broken down, and the apartment of pastor broken into. Nothing was stolen.

26/27 June – Threatening graffiti daubed on the Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in Krusevac.

30 June – Liturgical book stolen from Serbian Orthodox SS. Cosmas and Damian hospital in Belgrade. Thief arrested several days later.

30 June - Three unidentified young men entered a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in Vranje in early hours and started to attack the facade with stones and crowbars. They escaped from police. The police thoroughly investigated the attack, but without success.

3/4 July - Graffiti reading - "Death to Catholics", "Orthodoxy or death", "We will avenge Kosovo" - daubed on St Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in Pancevo. (RTV) Three attackers were arrested some days later, and charged with spreading racial, religious and national hatred. (Blic) No verdict has yet been delivered.

17 July - A Serbian Orthodox priest in Despotovac threatened and hit several Jehovah's Witnesses. The incident was reported to police, who sent the case to the public prosecutor.

22/23 July - Items worth about 50,000 Dinars stolen from the Serbian Orthodox St George the Martyr church in Starcevo, near Pancevo. (Blic)

29/30 July - Serbian Orthodox church in Pancevo robbed of 15,000 Dinars. (Blic)

31 July/1 August – Unidentified people daubed graffiti with nationalist symbols and vulgar messages about the Jehovah's Witnesses on the Kingdom Hall in Sremska Mitrovica.

6-10 August - Unidentified people again daubed graffiti with national symbols and vulgar messages about Jehovah's Witnesses on Kingdom Hall in Sremska Mitrovica during the night. The graffiti included the names of some arrested for war crimes trials before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague. The incident may be related to the arrest by Serbian police of Radovan Karadzic on 20 July.

3 September – Hand-written message "You will burn in Hell" signed by the "Serbian Nationalist Organisation Black Hand" found in the post box of the Evangelical (Pentecostal) church in Kraljevo.

9 September – A man armed with gun and 20 metres of cable tried to attack a Catholic priest in Budisava near Novi Sad. Police prevented the attack and arrested the attacker. (RTV)

16 September – A group of masked young men attacked the Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in Leskovac with stones and staves in the early morning. One attacker tried to break the window between protective bars while another prepared a Molotov cocktail. The attackers escaped after police were called. The police did not appear to seriously investigate the attack.

19/20 September – Graffiti - "Sectarians get out of Serbia" - daubed on the Adventist Church in Sivac.

22/23 September – Graffiti - "Sectarians get out of Serbia" and "Orthodoxy is Salvation – 1389" - daubed on the Adventist Church in Kragujevac.

27 September – Windows broken and graffiti daubed on the Adventist Church in Kula.

29 September – Pastor's car damaged at Adventist church car park in Novi Sad.

3/4 October – Windows of the Adventist church and pastor's home in Kragujevac stoned.

18 October – Several graves and monuments destroyed at a Catholic graveyard in Bela Crkva, an ethnic majority German village called Weisskirchen until the late 1940s, in Vojvodina. Police are hunting for six attackers (Dnevnik, Novi Sad)

18/19 October - Four windows of the Mormon church in Novi Sad broken.

26/27 October - Windows of a Mormon Church garage in Belgrade broken. (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Serbia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1260 and coverage of freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Serbia at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=53&results=50>.

The previous survey of attacks on religious minorities, from September 2006 to September 2007, is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1030.

A personal commentary, by an Austrian lawyer, arguing that Serbia should not follow Austria's system of dividing religious communities into different categories with differing legal rights is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=403.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

A printer-friendly map of Serbia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=yugosl>, under the title 'Serbia and Montenegro'.

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