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SERBIA: Attacks continue on religious minorities

By Drasko Djenovic, Forum 18

Although the number of violent attacks on Serbia's religious minorities has declined in recent years, numerous such attacks still continue, Forum 18 News Service has found in its latest annual survey. In June a Hare Krishna devotee was knifed. One blackspot is the town of Backa Palanka, where Seventh-day Adventist and Pentecostal churches have faced graffiti, arson and stone-throwing attacks and a Jehovah's Witness was assaulted. A newly-built Catholic church in Smederevo has faced three attacks in the past year, while Nazarene, Orthodox, Lutheran, Muslim and Mormon sites have also been attacked. On 6 September a new Islamic faculty being prepared in Novi Pazar was vandalised. Frustrated by officials' failure to prosecute those who boasted of burning down a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in 1999, Jehovah's Witnesses this year sued the Serbian state.

Cases of violent attacks against religious minorities - mainly on buildings - in Serbia have declined in number over the past year, Forum 18 News Service has found in its latest annual survey of such attacks. However, intolerance of the religious freedom of minorities is still a factor in Serbia's public life. This is illustrated by the attack earlier in September against the Islamic community in the traditionally Islamic majority area of Sandzak in southern Serbia. As in previous years, Jehovah's Witness and Seventh-day Adventist communities remain major targets of attacks. Some communities from both these religious minorities have told Forum 18 that they have even stopped counting how many times their windows have been broken or hostile graffiti has been painted on their buildings.

The police have arrested and brought court proceedings against a few perpetrators of attacks, but not against many others. In March 2006 the district court in Sabac finally began hearing a case against four men who tried to blackmail a Jehovah's Witness in Loznica in 2004 (see F18News 9 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=581). They face a six month prison sentence or a suspended two year sentence. In September 2006 a woman who attacked a Jehovah's Witness was fined (see below).

In the case of one attack on the Adventist church in the north-western town of Backa Palanka - which has suffered numerous attacks - police even refused to respond, despite a 27 December 2005 open letter from Adventist leaders to Serbian Police Minister Dusan Jovic, President Boris Tadic and Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica asking for protection for this and other Adventist churches. However, an encouraging development was that Serbia's Religion Minister, Milan Radulovic, expressed his sorrow for an attack on the Adventist headquarters in the capital Belgrade and offered ministry funds to repair the damage.

Frustrated by officials' persistent failure to take action after an arson attack in 1999 on a Kingdom Hall in Pozega, near Uzice, the Jehovah's Witnesses brought a court case on 8 May 2006 against the State of Serbia. The police and fire service have both failed to provide required legal reports on the incident, and no action has been taken against individuals who have publicly boasted of being responsible for the attack. A forensic scientist estimated the loss to be equivalent to over 50,000 Euros (414,400 Norwegian Kroner or 63,360 US Dollars).

During the past year, two significant legal developments were the passage of a new Religion Law (see eg. F18News 9 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=825) and of a Restitution Law (see eg. F18News 20 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=802).

Concern remains about the possible impact of these laws and their implementation on attitudes to the religious freedom of religious minorities. This concern was heightened by the fact that during debates on the Religion Law in the National Assembly - broadcast on Serbian state television - some parliamentary deputies made intolerant remarks about both Protestants and Catholics.

For the list below of incidents between September 2005 and September 2006 - which does not include incidents in Kosovo - Forum 18 has gathered information directly from religious communities, except where, as indicated, information is from published sources.

ATTACKS FROM SEPTEMBER - DECEMBER 2005

1 September 2005 - Hostile graffiti daubed on the facade of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Backa Palanka. The police investigation did not find the perpetrators. The local radio station told the church that it was not the "right political moment" to report the attack, while local TV stated that it would broadcast news of the attack "some other time".

5 September 2005 – In Backa Palanka a female Jehovah's Witness was knocked off her bicycle and injured by a woman previously known for hostility to Jehovah's Witnesses. In September 2006 the Backa Palanka municipal court fined the attacker 15,000 dinars (1,532 Norwegian Kroner, 183 Euros or 233 US Dollars), plus court costs of 2,000 dinars.

20 September 2005 - Arson attack on the Shalom Christian centre of the United Pentecostal Church International in Backa Palanka. The attack failed to destroy the building and the police investigation has not found the perpetrators. The local authority has asked the church not to hold its yearly conference in a public place, as some political parties "might use this for political purposes".

20 September 2005 - Further graffiti attack on the Adventist Church in Backa Palanka.

27 September 2005 - Attempt to steal furniture from the Adventist Church in Backa Palanka. Police stated that there were no fingerprints, so the perpetrators would be hard to find.

28 September 2005 – The entrance door on a still-uncompleted new Roman Catholic church in Smederovo was stoned and damaged. The priest, Fr Stjepan Parisic, said that a window had been broken with stones the previous month.

13 October 2005 - In the early afternoon a person with an iron bar broke the toughened window glass on the entrance door of the Mormon church in Belgrade. Police arrested the attacker, but the Mormons do not know if any trial took place.

15 October 2005 – In an early morning attack, bricks were thrown through the windows of the new headquarters in Novi Sad of the Adventist church in Vojvodina province. Police stated that they do not have enough information to find the perpetrators.

17 October 2005 - Attack with stones on the Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in Obrenovac, near Belgrade. The facade and structure of the building was damaged, and police arrested one underage attacker. Legal proceedings are being taken against him.

30 October 2005 - Door of the Adventist church in Backa Palanka broken. The police found the attacker.

31 October 2005 - Stoning of the headquarters of the Adventist church for Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia in Belgrade, breaking glass in the entrance door and a sign. Religion Minister Radulovic expressed his sorrow for this incident and offered to fund repairs to the damage.

31 October/1 November 2005 - During the night, anti-Muslim graffiti was painted in Novo Naselje district of Novi Sad, a few hours after the then Federal Minister for Minorities and Human Rights Rasim Ljajic (who is a Muslim) himself painted over anti-Hungarian graffiti in Novi Sad. (B92, 1 November 2005)

8 November 2005 - Anti-Muslim graffiti daubed on a primary school in Novi Pazar, in the Sandzak region where Muslims are the majority community. (Fonet, 8 November 2005)

10/11 November 2005 - During the night, glass was broken in the door of the Adventist Church in Kragujevac.

15/16 November 2005 - During the night, black road-making bitumen was painted on the facade and entrance of the Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in Sremska Mitrovica. One window was broken and attempts were made to break other windows, as well as to use a road-mending machine to demolish the building. Police arrested the attacker and a court hearing is due in November 2006.

24 November 2005 - The facade of the Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarene) in Arandjelovac was damaged, after earlier vandalism against windows. Police have not found the perpetrators.

10 December 2005 - Threats made to burn the Adventist church in Kragujevac. Police have not identified the person who made these threats.

12 December 2005 - Attack in Belgrade on two female Jehovah's Witnesses by individuals masquerading as police officers in civilian clothes, who destroyed their Bibles and literature and damaged their car. Police arrested the fake "policemen" and a court case is proceeding against them.

25 December 2005 - A Christmas crib in the Catholic chapel in Palic, near Subotica, was attacked and burned. (Radio Subotica Croatian language programme, 30 December 2005)

26 December 2005 - The entrance door of the Adventist Church in Backa Palanka and the main body of the church building was stoned at 2 am. Police refused to respond to the attack. After 30 minutes the church was broken into and some sound and other equipment stolen.

31 December 2005/1 January 2006 - During the night, windows of the Adventist church in Pirot were stoned and broken.

ATTACKS FROM JANUARY - SEPTEMBER 2006

22 January 2006 - The Catholic Church in Bor was robbed. Offerings from the previous day and three gold-plated chalices were stolen. (B92, 26 January 2006)

15 February 2006 - Two female Jehovah's Witnesses sharing their beliefs in Mladenovac near Belgrade were locked inside a building by a man who destroyed their literature and tried to drag them into a cellar. One Jehovah's Witness managed to escape and called the police, who rescued the other. The man responsible is being prosecuted.

15 February 2006 – Glass was broken on entrance door of Adventist church in Orlovat near Zrenjanin.

20 February 2006 - In the Zemun district of Belgrade, a male Jehovah's Witness was beaten on the head by a third party while sharing his beliefs with a family. The police arrested the attacker and the officials the Jehovah's Witness was talking to are appearing as prosecution witnesses in the court case against the attacker.

16 March 2006 - Windows of the Adventist church in Kikinda were broken.

29/30 March 2006 - During the night, the Catholic church in Smederevo was stoned. This was the third such attack. The valuable stained-glass window in the door made by the famous Slovenian artist Marko Rupnik was badly damaged. (B92, 31 March 2006 and Forum 18 information)

1 April 2006 - Arson attack on the entrance of the Adventist church in Omoljica, near Pancevo. The fire damaged the door, but not the newly-renovated church.

13/14 April 2006 - During the night, the Serbian Orthodox Church in the village of Neuzine, near Zrenjanin, was broken into and robbed. (B92, 17 April 2006)

17 April 2006 - Ten tombstones in the Slovak Evangelical-Lutheran graveyard in Dobanovci were knocked down.

20 April 2005 - Five more tombstones were knocked down and ten more damaged at the Slovak Evangelical-Lutheran graveyard in Dobanovci.

19/20 May 2006 - During the night, a truck with humanitarian aid from the German Christian organisation Sozialwerk Tostedt to the Pentecostal church in Leskovac was attacked. At 3 am, Leskovac police found that the truck - parked in front of the church - had the glass broken on both doors, as well as the windscreen and lights.

23 May 2006 - Local Smederevo weekly magazine Nas Glas published an article "Misuse of Humanity" complaining that an outing for deprived children to an Adventist church-owned holiday house constituted attracting young people to a "sect". On 30 May the magazine published Pastor David Adamovic's response.

25 May 2006 - The Adventist church in Bojnik, near Leskovac, was stoned and had windows broken.

7 June 2006 - Narodne novine, a Nis local newspaper published an article with the title "Misuse of the [Football] World Cup and children", attacking the Child Evangelism Fellowship for having reported the World Cup schedule in one of its leaflets. A reply to the article was not published.

9/10 June 2006 - During the night, ten gravestones were damaged in Temerin Catholic graveyard and four wooden crosses were taken from graves. Two small statues of Jesus were also damaged. Police are investigating. (B92 and Beta, 12 June 2006)

14/15 June 2006 - During the night, two windows of a Pentecostal church in Kraljevo were broken with stones. Police have not found the perpetrators.

15 June 2006 - The Belgrade newspaper Kurir published an article on its front page and half of an inside page entitled "Dangerous sect influences children", attacking the Child Evangelism Fellowship. The article alleged it is linked with a group promoting child pornography and paedophilia. The article also attacked the Adventist church in Smederevo, which has no connection with the Child Evangelism Fellowship.

16 June 2006 - Kurir printed another article attacking the Child Evangelism Fellowship.

17/18 June 2006 - During the night, a Hare Krishna devotee from Jagodina, Zivota Milanovic, was attacked in the doorway of his home. Jagodina hospital treated him for three knife wounds, as well as a cross carved on his head. He had earlier been attacked in July 2005 (see F18News 9 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=647). No-one has been prosecuted for

either attack.

7 July 2006 - The Adventist church in Bojnik, near Leskovac, was stoned and had its windows broken once again. The police have not found the perpetrators.

23 July 2006 - The entrance of the Catholic church in Smederevo was stoned, the fourth time since August 2005 that this church has been attacked. (Radio Free Europe and Glas Javnosti, 24 July 2006 and Forum 18 information)

5 August 2006 - The Romani (Gypsy) Emanuel Pentecostal church in Donja Mahala, in Vranje, was broken into and four microphones were stolen. Police investigated the crime without any success.

9 August 2006 - The Romani Emanuel church in Donja Mahala was again broken into, and this time two sound-boxes and a mixer were stolen. Once again, police investigated the crime without any success.

16 August 2006 - Religion Minister Radulovic stated that "the Montenegrin Orthodox Church cannot build churches in Serbia." (Glas Javnosti, Danas and Kurir, 17 August 2006) (On this question see also F18News 9 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=825.)

27 August 2006 - Police stopped near Gornji Milanovac an Islamic delegation including the Mufti of Sandzak, Muamer ef Zukurlic. They were returning from Belgrade, and their car and personal possessions were searched for 95 minutes. Mufti Zukurlic refused to allow his personal luggage to be searched and protested to the Prime Minister.

2 September 2006 – Metal railings in front of the Adventist church in Orlovat near Zrenjanin damaged, just before celebration of congregation's sixtieth anniversary.

6 September 2006 - A building in Novi Pazar being renovated for a Faculty of Islamic Studies was broken into and vandalised, causing about 3,000 Euros (24,870 Norwegian Kroner or 3,800 US Dollars) worth of damage. (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Serbia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=387 and survey of attacks on religious minorities in 2004 and early 2005 at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=581 and survey of attacks later in 2005 at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=647.

Full reports of the religious freedom situation in Serbia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=53>.

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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