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BOSNIA: To legally build a place of worship...

By Drasko Djenovic, Forum 18

Legally building a place of worship in Bosnia and Herzegovina is often difficult, Forum 18 News Service has found. Religious communities of all faiths face obstruction in getting permission to build or re-build places of worship. For example, in the Bosniak-controlled area, mosques have been built without official permission. But Catholic and Protestant churches, and Jehovah's Witnesses, face years of official obstruction, Forum 18 has been told. In the Croat-controlled area, especially in and around Mostar, Muslim and Protestant places of worship cannot be legally built. In the Serb-controlled area, Serbian Orthodox churches can be built, but places of worship of other faiths can face much obstruction. Another problem Forum 18 knows of limiting building and other activities throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina is taxation. All religious communities must pay 17 per cent VAT on all their activities - even on humanitarian aid.

Eleven years after the end of Bosnia and Herzegovina's civil war, religious communities of all faiths face obstruction in getting permission to build new places of worship, or rebuild those damaged or destroyed, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. In the Bosniak-controlled parts of the Federation (the larger of the two entities which make up the country), many mosques have been built, apparently without official controls, but Catholic and Protestant churches face years of official obstruction. In Croat-controlled areas of the Federation, especially in and around Mostar, Muslim and Protestant places of worship cannot be legally built. In the Serb-controlled Republika Srpska (the smaller of the two entities), Serbian Orthodox churches can be built, but places of worship of other faiths face much obstruction.

The Catholic Church recently received permission to build a church in Novi Grad, in Sarajevo, "after many years struggling for building permission," Monsignor Ivo Tomasevic, Secretary of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bosnia and Herzegovina, told Forum 18 from the capital Sarajevo on 24 May. "For many years, Catholics did not have a place to celebrate Mass. This is the first building permission we have received in Sarajevo since the Second World War."

"However," Monsignor Tomasevic noted, "we have also been waiting for years for building permission for a church in the Grbavica district of Sarajevo. If you ask town officials they will tell you that they are open and that we will receive this or that paper. But to complete the whole process to get building permission is impossible. There is not the political will for us to receive it."

Sarajevo City Council claims no responsibility for planning in Grbavica, stating that this is the sole responsibility of Novo Sarajevo District. With considerable difficulty, Forum 18 was able to track down an official able to discuss the matter. Velma Kljucic, of the Department of Urban Planning of Novo Sarajevo District, told Forum 18 on 12 July that "the first planned location for a Catholic Church was near the Zeljin Stadium. But because of a planned swimming pool, we offered another location. But at his location a mosque was planned, and residents were opposed to either a Catholic church or a mosque. So we will need to revert to the first location. This means changes in plans, new paper work, and so on."

Jehovah's Witnesses in Sarajevo also have problems in Novo Sarajevo. Building permission was received without too many problems in Ilidza District, Djuro Landic from their office in the Croatian capital Zagreb told Forum 18 on 12 July. "But in districts like Novo Sarajevo we have been indirectly told that we will never receive permission." In Novo Sarajevo, "we found a plot for a Kingdom Hall and after a year collecting the different necessary papers, we learned that the urban plan for this location was changed."

From Forum 18's knowledge of similar situations in the region, it may be many years before the problems faced by Catholics and Jehovah's Witnesses in Novo Sarajevo are resolved.

Monsignor Tomasevic noted that some religious communities do not face difficulties. "Something I have found personally in Sarajevo is that mosques are built like 'mushrooms after the rain' - as we say in the Balkans," he told Forum 18. "Some are smaller, some bigger." He said that some sources put the number of mosques in Sarajevo at 250 or more.

Hare Krishna devotees rent a building as a temple, Miro Skorup (religious name Mohaprabhu das) of the community told Forum 18 from Sarajevo on 12 July. He stated that "Sarajevo is a multi-ethnic town, where the international community is highly involved in the government, so we believe that we would not have too many troubles in getting building permission." Outlining how many

devotees there are in Bosnia, Skorup said that "we collected 300 signatures for registration without too many problems. We do not have a 'church register'".

"Obtaining building permission in Bosnia and Herzegovina varies from town to town," Landic of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. "After the civil war, we have built 6-7 new Kingdom Halls to add to those we built before the war."

Bosnia-Herzegovina's slightly over 2,000 Jehovah's Witnesses have not requested building permission in the past year.

There were "a lot of problems in Zenica, in the Bosniak-controlled area. We submitted all the required papers and exhausted all the legal possibilities in the town. So eventually we had to take our case up with the highest authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo, such as the Ombudsmen." When the Jehovah's Witnesses did this, "very soon afterwards we received building permission for Zenica's Kingdom Hall," Landic told Forum 18.

In Bihac in the north-west, also in the Bosniak-controlled area, Jehovah's Witnesses are planning to ask for building permission for a Kingdom Hall. "We will see how this will work out," Landic commented.

In the ethnic Croat-dominated town of Mostar in the south, sharp geographic religious divisions are clearly visible. City authorities have not allowed the Muslim community to rebuild the destroyed mosque, Muharem Omerdic, director of the educational service of the Islamic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, complained to Forum 18. He added that in Banja Luka, in Republika Srpska, renovating the town's sixteenth-century Farhadija Mosque, destroyed during the civil war, remains a big problem. "It is a political game," he told Forum 18 from Sarajevo on 30 June. "The Islamic community insists that everywhere where believers and real needs exist, rebuilding places of worship should be allowed."

Mufti Seid Smaikic of Mostar told Forum 18 on 30 June that, several times, the Muslim community has built small mosques without permission. "Building a mosque east of Mostar, towards towns such as Capljina and Stolac, conflicts with the 'ethnically clean' concept that some politicians have," he told Forum 18 on 30 June. "When we apply for building permission, the administration just gives no response. So in west Mostar, we built a mosque without building permission." Smaikic said "besides these small mosques, we need bigger – modern mosques. In Mostar we have been waiting for permission for such a mosque since 2000."

It is not just Mostar's Muslims who face obstruction. Karmel Kresonja, president of the Evangelical Church in the non-Serb area of Bosnia and Herzegovina, says there is a "big problem" in all of the Croatian-controlled area. "In Mostar we have been waiting for planning permission for more than six years," he told Forum 18 on 3 July. "It is basically impossible to get it, even though in law we have the right to build a church."

Despite repeated requests from Forum 18, and a promised response from Miroslav Landeka of the city Press Office which has not been made, the authorities in Mostar have declined all discussion of building permission.

Bernard Mikulic of an Evangelical church in Capljina, in the Croat-controlled area, stated to Forum 18 on 30 June that "we are told that under the urban plan, it is not possible to build a church in the area where we land for a church. We are not able to get building permission." The church intends to ask the authorities where it can have a church. "But to be honest, I do not think that we will be able to get permission for a church," Mikulic said, "even though under Bosnian law we have the right to have a church for worship."

Mikulic told Forum 18 that "only in Sarajevo do I know of Evangelical churches which have not had building permission problems. In Capljina," he continued, "we received building permission for a house where we can privately have singing and prayers – but we cannot hold public worship services there." (The building permission describes this as a "monastery," but the permission is for a pastor's house with a room for worship.) The church also intends to apply for permission to build a conference hall and office.

In Republika Srpska, the Orthodox Church is the only religious community that does not face obstructions in gaining building permission. Forum 18 has learnt that, because of this, Protestant churches usually buy a house and then convert it into a church.

Monsignor Tomasevic noted that, in Republika Srpska, the problem for Catholics is not rebuilding churches, but the return of Catholic people. From a pre-civil war Catholic population of about 200,000 Catholics, only 6,000 stayed in the area, and in the 11 years since the civil war about 6,000 to 7,000 have returned. "Most churches and parish houses that were destroyed have been rebuilt or renovated. The problem is that the people cannot return," he complained. "It is easier to rebuild church buildings than the living church. The government causes administrative problems to make it harder for people to return."

Landic of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that in Republika Srpska, "the Serbian Orthodox Church has the last word." Noting also problems with registration, Landic said that it "is almost impossible for us to get building permission." In Banja Luka, the area capital, permission was received. "We were lucky that because there was already building permission for another building on the plot of land, not giving permission for a Kingdom Hall would openly show religious intolerance, so we received it." Landic claimed that the situation in the entire Republika Srpska "is chaotic. The Land Register is in chaos and everyone asks for a bribe."

Forum 18 knows of religious communities with problems gaining building permission in Republika Srpska, who think that publicly discussing this will end their chance of gaining permission. In one case known to Forum 18, a Protestant church's building

permission was revoked when it became public that a Protestant church would be built.

Another problem facing religious communities is taxation, which restricts humanitarian work, building projects and other activities. Since January 2006 all religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina must pay 17 per cent VAT even on humanitarian aid. "For public kitchens and other humanitarian work, this is a big burden," Monsignor Tomasevic, Secretary of the Catholic Bishops' Conference, complained. "Especially when it is well-known that the whole country still depends on humanitarian aid."

A printer-friendly map of Bosnia and Herzegovina is available at
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=bosher>

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