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SERBIA: Violence continues against religious communities

By Drasko Djenovic, Forum 18

The number of attacks on Serbia's religious communities appears to continue to be declining, Forum 18 News Service notes in its latest annual survey of such attacks. However, the attacks themselves seem to be becoming more violent and, as in previous years, members of religious minorities are especially likely to be attacked. The police continue to be apparently unwilling to protect members of religious minorities or religious sites at risk of attack – even if they have already been attacked. Members of religious minorities have in the past year been beaten and stabbed, and places of worship have been the targets of arson attacks. Places of worship of the Orthodox Church have occasionally been robbed, but the vast majority of attacks have been on Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, Jehovah's Witness and other religious minority individuals and property. Religious communities are sometimes reluctant to report attacks to the police or make them publicly known. Forum 18 knows of smaller "traditional" communities which have denied that they have been attacked after attacks have taken place.

Few violent attacks against religious communities in Serbia – on individuals or religious property - ever result in any punishment, Forum 18 News Service notes. This continues the pattern of previous years. The latest Forum 18 survey of such attacks – covering September 2006 to September 2007 – seems to indicate that although fewer attacks are now taking place, the attacks themselves are becoming more violent. The apparent decline in the number of attacks continues a trend noted from September 2005 to September 2006. However, members of religious minorities are still especially likely to be attacked and have in the past year been beaten and stabbed. Places of worship of minority communities have been the victims of arson attacks.

The information in the survey may be incomplete, but 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.

One such source is the Novi Sad police, who told Forum 18 on 21 May 2007 that in 2006 it recorded 22 attacks on religious communities in their jurisdiction. But between January and April 2007 it recorded 16, a significant increase in the rate of attacks. This may reflect different ways of recording incidents or greater willingness by victims to report attacks. The attacks in the first four months of 2007 consisted of two on the Serbian Orthodox Church, five on Catholics, five on Adventists, as well as one each on a synagogue, a Baptist church, a Nazarene church and a Slovak Lutheran church. Figures for attacks between May and September 2007 are not available. Although most of the attacks in Novi Sad are smaller in scale and not as serious as those elsewhere in Serbia, they remain significant because of the town's multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature.

Religious communities are sometimes reluctant to report attacks to the police or make them publicly known. There have been, for example, numerous attacks on the Christian Apostolic Church of the Nazarene, who generally do not report attacks publicly. Serbian Orthodox churches are often attacked by robbers, as are Catholic churches, though the Orthodox and Catholic Churches do not normally make each such attacks public.

The controversial new Religion Law categorised religious communities either as "traditional" or "non-traditional" (see F18News 28 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=771). Some within the smaller communities classified as "traditional" have told Forum 18 that they want to follow the lead of the Orthodox and Catholics in not often publicly discussing attacks. For example, Forum 18 knows of smaller "traditional" communities which have denied that they have been attacked when attacks have taken place. Because many officials and ordinary people describe "non-traditional" communities in a hostile way as "sects", Forum 18 notes that this makes those communities more likely to be attacked.

As in previous years (see 25 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=845), few of those who attack religious minorities are ever identified. Zivota Milanovic, the only Hare Krishna devotee in Jagodina, has been the victim of repeated stabbing attacks from July 2005 without the police taking any effective action to identify and punish the perpetrator. Forum 18 has learnt that nine months after the Evangelical church in Kraljevo and the Adventist church in Stapani were attacked with Molotov cocktails, police have still not found the attackers, despite calls on the police to do so by Serbia's President Boris Tadic.

Religious minorities have complained to Forum 18 that even when perpetrators are identified, charges – if any – are often minimal, especially if the attackers are young people. Police and the courts often respond that "the kids were drunk" and the attackers usually end up with just a small fine.

Police appear to be unwilling to protect members of religious minorities or religious sites at risk of attack – even if they have already been attacked. Muhamed Zukurlic, the Mufti of Sandzak and leader of Serbia's Muslim community, complained of five death threats between December 2006 and March 2007 which forced him to start using a private bodyguard – since the police did not find it necessary to offer protection. He made his remarks on a programme on the Belgrade television station B92, where he was a guest together with the then Religion Minister Milan Radulovic.

Places of worship of the Orthodox Church have occasionally been robbed, but the vast majority of attacks have been on Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, Jehovah's Witness and other religious minority individuals and property (see F18News 25 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=845).

The list below of incidents between September 2006 and September 2007 does not include incidents in Kosovo.

ATTACKS FROM SEPTEMBER - DECEMBER 2006

18 October 2006 - Just before midnight two men desecrated Hadrovic Mosque in Nis and threatened the believers who were in the mosque at that time. They then threw stones at the mosque. (B92)

25/26 October 2006 - A statue of an angel was demolished next to St Teresa of Avila Catholic Cathedral in Subotica (Centre for Development of Civil Society)

7 November 2006 - During the night a car was used to break the gate in the courtyard of the Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in Vranje and destroy several trees. Police found the attackers, who are due to face trial in November 2007 at the Municipal Court for spreading religious hatred.

3 November 2006 - Wahhabi followers physically attacked believers who attend the Arab Mosque in Novi Pazar. (Serbian news agencies)

9 November 2006 - Two Jehovah's Witnesses were attacked in Uzice. A dog was set on one, while the other was beaten. Jehovah's Witness headquarters brought a criminal case against the attackers at Uzice Municipal Court, since the Public Prosecutor refused to take any action.

10/11 November 2006 - During the night the Catholic Church in Kac near Novi Sad was attacked. Three windows were broken by balls of earth. (B92)

28 November 2006 - Two Jehovah's Witnesses were attacked in Arandjelovac near Kragujevac. Police identified the attacker. Jehovah's Witness headquarters brought a criminal case at Kragujevac Municipal Court.

16/17 December 2006 – The front window at the Baptist church in Novi Sad was broken with stones.

16/17 December 2006 – During the weekend the Catholic Holy Spirit Church in Novi Sad was broken into. After breaking two windows a person entered the church and stole 10,000 Dinars (907 Norwegian Kroner, 119 Euros or 167 US Dollars).

17/18 December 2006 – The glass front door at the Baptist church in Novi Sad was broken with stones.

18 December 2006 – In the early hours a Molotov cocktail was thrown at the Evangelical (Pentecostal) church in Kraljevo. The fire department put out the fire and police started an investigation. Although the church is in the town centre on the same street as the police station and town hall, the attacker was never found. Katarina Nikolic of Kraljevo police told Forum 18 in May they were still trying to find who did it. Pastor Aleksandar Vitakic told Forum 18 that he is not aware that a culprit has been identified. The town mayor helped with partial renovation of the meeting hall.

20 December 2006 – In the early afternoon green paint was thrown on the car of Pastor Vitakic of the Kraljevo Evangelical (Pentecostal) church while he was in the building cleaning up from the previous attack. On 12 January 2007, Kraljevo Deputy Public Prosecutor Jelena Belopavlovic declared: "This prosecutor's office did not find any basis for criminal prosecution against anyone, for any kind of criminal act for which it presses charges according to its official duty."

23/24 December 2006 – During the night seven gravestones were knocked over at the Catholic graveyard in Novi Sad. Police investigated the attack. This is not the first time this graveyard was attacked. The biggest attack was in 2003, when 70 gravestones were knocked over. Although this graveyard is regularly attacked around Catholic religious holidays, police have still not found an effective way to protect it.

ATTACKS FROM JANUARY - SEPTEMBER 2007

4/5 January 2007 – During the night conifer trees were stolen from the yard at the Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in Sabac and four windows broken. The attacker was not found.

Early January 2007 – The Brethren church in Sremska Mitrovica was broken into. Two windows were broken and a door damaged. A curtain, electric heater and other items were stolen and a wooden partition wall in the worship hall was damaged.

8 January 2007 – Early in the morning the Adventist Church in Stapar near Sombor was attacked with a Molotov cocktail. The pulpit, several pews and a musical instrument were burned inside the church. Some of the walls were damaged. The fire department brought the fire under control before it reached the roof. This was not the first attack on this church. Several years earlier another Molotov cocktail was thrown but the fire failed to catch hold, so no damage was done. Mirjana Cvijanovic from Sombor police department told Forum 18 the investigation is still going on.

8/9 January 2007 – Intruders desecrated the Catholic Church in Palic near Subotica and stole a small amount of money. The church has suffered a number of similar attacks. Police found two perpetrators, both underage. (Centre for Development of Civil Society)

11 January 2007 – Arandjelovac police informed local Baptist pastor Simo Ralevic that they are unable to find who threatened him and his family between October 2006 and January 2007, as well as who wrote threats and graffiti on church property.

Early February 2007 – Catholic parish house in Backo Petrovo Selo near Subotica was robbed of about 270,000 Dinars (24,481 Norwegian Kroner, 3,202 Euros or 4,520 US Dollars). (www.suboticadanas.info)

2 February 2007 – In Obrovac near Backa Palanka, 1,300,000 Dinars (117,710 Norwegian Kroner, 15,407 Euros or 21,766 US Dollars) was stolen from the Catholic church. This church has been robbed several times since November 2006. (Centre for Development of Civil Society)

23 February 2007 – Four gravestones at Belgrade's Jewish graveyard were damaged.

24/25 February 2007 – The Catholic Church in Futog was broken into and items stolen, including a relic of St. Eugen. Police identified the perpetrators. (B92)

18 March 2007 – Towards midnight the windows of the Sombor Adventist pastor were broken with stones. One stone landed near the bed of two of his young sons. Sombor police told Forum 18 they found the attacker but did not charge him with committing a religiously-motivated attack.

28 March 2007 – Two Jehovah's Witness missionaries – US citizen Christopher Kunicki and Austrian citizen Wolfgang Hrdina - were attacked during their regular door to door visiting in Stari Banovci. One resident who invited them in, Miroslav Savic, asked his wife to bring his gun. He then threatened them with the gun for the next 45 minutes, while insulting their nationalities and faith. Later police investigation showed the gun was loaded. As soon as they were released, the two Jehovah's Witnesses informed the police, who identified the attacker and the gun. Savic confessed to police that he threatened them. The District Public Prosecutor in Stara Pazova (to which Stari Banovci belongs) told Forum 18 on 27 September that the victims did not appear in court for a scheduled hearing. The Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that the victims received no invitation to the hearing.

29 March 2007 – In the early hours the Adventist headquarters for Vojvodina province in Novi Sad were stoned, breaking four windows.

10 April 2007 – Jehovah's Witness Hrdina was visiting the barber in Banovci-Dunav. Savic, who had threatened him two weeks earlier, was in a cafe opposite the barber's. When he recognised Hrdina, he broke the windscreen of Hrdina's car. He then hit Hrdina on the head, knocked him down and kicked him. At one point he was standing on Hrdina's chest and grabbing his collar. Passers-by helped Hrdina to escape. After medical help, police handed the case to the prosecutor. The District Public Prosecutor in Stara Pazova (to which Banovci-Dunav belongs) told Forum 18 on 27 September that the investigation process is finished. The 28 March and 10 April attacks have been joined into one case.

May 2007 – At a chemistry high school in Vrsac, a history professor spoke on religion and gave the first year students 12 pages of material against Jehovah's Witnesses.

11 May 2007 – Mersad Sahman, President of the Council for Relations with Religious Communities of the Bosnian National Council in Serbia, was beaten in Novi Pazar. (Centre for Development of Civil Society)

29 May 2007 – A Hungarian-speaking Adventist Church in Novi Sad was stoned. Two windows and shutters were broken and traces of fire damage were visible.

14 June 2007 – A young Jehovah's Witness in Cacak was tortured by a family member after a religious meeting. When she called the police, one officer concluded: "Her father should beat her. If she does not like it she can leave home." Police later conducted an

internal investigation and found that the Jehovah's Witness complaint was true.

29 June 2007 – In the early hours of the morning, Hare Krishna devotee Zivota Milanovic was stabbed six times in the ribs, arms and legs, the fourth such attack over three years. The attacker falsely identified himself as a police officer and when Milanovic opened the door he was attacked. He was hospitalised. The Head of the Criminal Police Department in Jagodina, Zoran Vasiljevic, told the state news agency Tanjug on 4 July: "We are doing everything in our power, but we do not have cooperation from Milanovic. Three times he complains of attacks, but can never identify who attacked him! If only he would at least give to us some description."

9 July 2007 – A sticker "Sects are death for the Serbian nation" was glued to the Adventist headquarters in Belgrade. Thanks to a security camera, the young men who did it were identified a few days later. They are members of the Nacionalni Stroj (National Guard) neo-Nazi organisation.

4 August 2007 – During door to door service by two female Jehovah's Witnesses in New Belgrade, a person who received a leaflet asked them to wait for a moment. Soon he returned with a bullet with the words: "This is for you". After they refused to take it he threw it at them. Police were informed, but the Jehovah's Witnesses remain unaware if any action was taken.

5 August 2007 – In Borca near Belgrade a Jehovah's Witness was threatened with sexual assault by a police officer in civilian clothes. Investigation identified the police officer as being based at a Belgrade police station, but the Jehovah's Witnesses remain unaware if any action was taken against the officer.

August 2007 – Several Belgrade town officials, newspapers and political parties questioned who allowed the Jehovah's Witnesses to rent the city's Pioneer Sports Hall for a three-day congress. A few news outlets published hostile articles about the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Late August 2007 – Senior Belgrade Police Inspector Zoran Lukovic blamed "sectarians" for the murder of a four-year-old boy and his uncle in Novi Banovci on 27 August. Later investigation showed that the murders had no religious background.

31 August – 7 September 2007 - Belgrade newspaper Vecernje novosti (Evening news) published a series of articles on "sects", where Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses and Satanists were bracketed together. The Jehovah's Witness plan to sue the paper.

4 September 2007 – Parliamentary deputies of Nova Srbija (New Serbia) political party announced that they will try to make the Religion Law harsher to step up the fight against "sects". They also requested an investigation into how the Jehovah's Witnesses were able to rent the Pioneer Sports Hall for their August congress.

10/11 September 2007 – Two stones were thrown at Leskovac Pentecostal church but did not hit the glass on the entrance door.

14 September 2007 – Slobodan Gvozdenovic, leader of local political party Pobjeda za Valjevo (Victory for Valjevo), held a press conference in front of the town's newly-built Baptist Church warning of "the danger of the non-registered Baptist sect". "This American garbage that was built here will be demolished. I have no doubt that we will do it." Local TV Valjevo broadcast the threat, but also quoted a local Orthodox priest defending the Baptists.

16/17 September 2007 – During the night the slogan "Stop Sects" was daubed on Kraljevo Evangelical (Pentecostal) church and the town's Adventist church.

18 September 2007 – Dubravka Filipovski, Vice President of the Nova Srbija political party, called for "a responsible position against sects". "Our society more and more faces a serious problem: sectarians who have recently by pathological rites been sowing death among Serbian citizens."

23 September 2007 – The day after the new Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall in Batajnica opened, the facade and entrance door were damaged. Just one day later Police Inspector Lukovic began public lectures against "sects" organised by the local Serbian Orthodox Church. Batajnica is near Novi Banovci, where the August murders Lukovic wrongly attributed to "sectarians" (see above) took place. (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Serbia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=387 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>.

A previous survey of attacks on religious minorities in 2004 and early 2005 is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=581, a survey of attacks later in 2005 is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=647, and a survey of attacks on religious minorities between September 2005 and September 2006 is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=845.

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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