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SERBIA/MONTENEGRO: Romany tent church demolition averted?

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

This morning (30 April), building inspectors, three police squad cars, an electrical distribution company crew and a demolition team, tried to demolish a tent used by the Protestant Evangelical Romany Church, observed by Forum 18 News Service. However, almost 1,000 believers from the church held a worship concert in the tent and in a yard, stopping the demolition. This was the latest move in a long-running struggle between the city council and the church, in which the council based its actions on the fact that building is prohibited on the site. But only the church tent was singled out for demolition, despite there being other buildings on the site, including an industrial plant and homes. An agreement was reached later today, under which the city council will provide new land for the church tent, and the church will move the tent to this land.

Building inspectors from the city of Leskovac (300 km south of Belgrade, and south west of the city of Nis), followed by three police squad cars, an electrical distribution company crew and a demolition team, this morning (30 April 2004) attempted to execute a Serbian Supreme Court decision to demolish a tent used by the Protestant Evangelical Romany Church, observed by Forum 18 News Service. Almost a thousand believers from the church, meeting both in the tent and in a yard, held a worship concert, thus stopping the demolition.

Later today, church and community representatives, with the chief building inspector and a police commander, made a written agreement to postpone the court decision until the city council makes another location for the tent available in a different part of town. Romany community representatives are united in supporting the church's plea to the authorities to allow the tent relocation to take place. Church representatives are determined to solve the problem without any further friction, and many NGOs and Romany organisations also support the church's wish for a peaceful resolution of the question.

Nedzip Eminovic, City Council coordinator for Romany community, told Forum 18 on 30 April in Leskovac that "We showed a maximum of understanding. Now it is up to the church to complete the project: to purchase an adjoining lot of a land (which will be made available by the City Council). When the Council procedure is completed, the church will be free to have its building."

"The land where the tent is, belongs to us," says Selim Alijevic, Protestant Evangelical Romany church pastor, "and, although the tent as a building is illegal, so are the 460 other houses and buildings in the neighbourhood. This land is stated to be a water supply area and so any building is prohibited. However, no-one in the whole suburb has ever received a demolition order, except us. We appealed to the various relevant courts during the last two years, and now the final decision has been made. We have to go, because the Supreme Court says so." During the appeals process, a written appeal of 2,200 people was sent to the City Mayor to Dr. Vojislav Kostunica, the Serbian prime minister, and to Rasim Ljajic, minister for minorities of Serbia and Montenegro.

"By the order of the Supreme Court of Serbia, no. 1636/03, related to the Evangelical Church Spiritual Center in Leskovac, the decision has become executive on 30 April 2004," Zoran Dojcinovic, chief building inspector said in his brief statement to the press, at the church tent site in Leskovac, "The building inspectors came to demolish the tent, measuring 30 by 20 meters. As we were unable to perform the demolition due to the large number of people and believers, present, we will postpone the act of demolition. We had a meeting with the local Romany community representatives and church representatives, and we agreed, or rephrased, they gave guarantees that they themselves will move the tent to the new location, when the location is given to them. That is all I can say."

"That piece of land is right now a garbage dump," Stanko Stankovic, elder of the Serbian Evangelical Church in Leskovac, mother church of the Romany community, told Forum 18, speaking of the proposed new site. "This used to be land used for clay extraction, but the holes were never filled up. The Council needs to level the land, and they promised us that they would supply water, sewage disposal and a road. Then, we will ourselves move the tent."

"The root of all problems is some of the Serbian neighbours, who do not like Romany having meetings at the present place, and they do not like our church as well," states a written statement given to Forum 18 by the Evangelical Church in Leskovac, signed by both the pastors of the Serbian and the Romany church. "They are using their political ties with the City Council in an attempt to "move

us out" from their neighbourhood (despite the fact that our immediate neighbours are Romany). The legal reason they found is the fact that our land borders on a sanitarian area of the water supply, where building is prohibited. What is interesting is that, in this area, there are 463 individual houses built on it, as well as the well-known pharmaceutical industry Zdravlje. We wonder why these other buildings do not spoil the water. We are prepared to support a project to provide special water filters to prevent any possibility of pollution, but the only answer we get is: "demolition".

"We still have to see with the Mayor what will come out, but so far we have a good understanding," Pastor Alijevic told Forum 18, after the inspectors and police left the site. "We want them to give us fair conditions at the new site, and we will purchase another, adjoining land lot, and prepare all the needed documentation. We will move from here, we signed this agreement with the building inspector Dojcinovic."

Maksut Bakic, a City Council member from the Romany community, commented that "Demolition of this tent would be a dramatic act against the Romany community as a whole, not only to the believers. I think that this new compromise is for the benefit of us all. We will do our best to build a nice church, since it is in the interest of our Romany believers to remain under the tent."

The President of the 'Forum for the Romany' initiative, a local NGO, Tane Kurtic, pointed out to Forum 18 that "This denomination is becoming a national religion for the Romany people in this region. There are 9,000 Romany people in Leskovac, 14,000 in the region, and 2,560 of them belong to this church. In the last three years the numbers of believers grew in significant numbers and they will continue to grow. This church is felt by the Roma to be their own. These people need to have their own place, to worship their God, as they desire and to enjoy freedom in it. In this case we need help of the local community, of the Romany people, but we also expect support from the majority Serbian population." The Romany Evangelical Church is the fastest growing denomination in Serbia and Montenegro with at least 10 mission stations and newly-planted churches in the last two years.

This week, several NGOs appealed for a postponement of the tent demolition, including the Belgrade Centre for Minority Rights, and the YUROM centre. Various appeals were also sent to foreign embassies in Serbia, and to the head of the OSCE mission, Maurizio Massari.

A printer-friendly map of Serbia and Montenegro is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=yugosl>

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