

17 April 2003

SERBIA: Latest attack leaves Adventist pastor hospitalised

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

Adventist pastor Josip Tikvicki remains hospitalised with concussion after being severely beaten in the night of 15-16 April when he challenged people who were attacking his church in the city of Zrenjanin. "This is the fifth such incident with Adventist churches in the last ten days. We believe there is an orchestrated campaign against us," Radisa Antic, president of the Adventists' South-East European Union, told Forum 18 in Belgrade on 16 April. Such attacks – which took place despite the current state of emergency – have left Serbia's Adventist community "threatened and insecure". Human rights activist Sonja Biserko told Forum 18 that the attacks are the product of 12 years of nationalism under Milosevic and the last two years of uncontrolled media promotion of the Serbian Orthodox Church. This has, she claims, created a young generation which "hates" religious minorities.

Adventist pastor Josip Tikvicki, who was severely beaten in the night of 15-16 April when he challenged people who were attacking his church in the city of Zrenjanin, 65 kilometres (40 miles) north-east of the Serbian capital Belgrade, remains in hospital as a result of injuries he sustained. Forum 18 News Service has learnt that he is suffering with concussion to the head, several fractured ribs, a broken jaw – which has left him unable to talk - and a host of minor injuries. "This is the fifth such incident with Adventist churches in the last ten days. We believe there is an orchestrated campaign against us," Radisa Antic, president of the Adventists' South-East European Union, told Forum 18 in Belgrade on 16 April.

"Pastor Tikvicki heard some people stoning the windows at the church," Dragan Ciric from Adventist headquarters in Belgrade told a press conference in Zrenjanin on 16 April, according to the Beta news agency. "He went out to ask for an explanation. At that moment, several persons kicked and hit him, he fell to the ground and lost consciousness." The police found Tikvicki in front of the church and an ambulance took him to hospital. Ciric described the attack as a finale to all the earlier attacks and threats in Zrenjanin. He said that Adventist representatives immediately visited city officials to protest.

"The government will issue a statement soon," an official of the ministry of ethnic and national minorities of Serbia and Montenegro told Forum 18 in Belgrade on 16 April. However, the ministry has so far made no statement on the attack, the latest in a series across Serbia.

"The first attack was during our church service, at 6pm on 5 April," Ratko Kuburic, pastor of the Belgrade Adventist church, told Forum 18 on 16 April. "A large stone was thrown at the windows of our children's department when no one was in the rooms." He said three days later another large stone was thrown at the church during the afternoon, again damaging two windows. "When similar incidents occurred in the past, police reacted and said that it may be because a high school is in the neighbourhood. This time, on Saturday, the school was closed."

Antic told Forum 18 that only a few days after the attacks in Belgrade, an entrance door to the church in the city of Kragujevac, 130 kilometres (80 miles) south of Belgrade, was broken down. "This was not the first attack on our building in Kragujevac, and I plan this afternoon to go there and visit the elders. However, we are much more concerned with the wounded pastor Tikvicki. His wife believes that the perpetrators were there before, she was able to recognise a car they used."

He said the Adventist Church recognised that Serbia is at present in a state of emergency after the assassination of prime minister Zoran Djindjic in Belgrade on 12 March. "But we had to react because we believe that all these attacks are not coincidental, but rather orchestrated by some organisation that is targeting us, a religious minority." He said he had immediately contacted various government offices, but had so far received no answer.

"The Serbian and Montenegrin ministry of ethnic and national minorities received a statement from the Adventist headquarters this morning," an official of the minister's office confirmed to Forum 18 on 16 April. "The statement was forwarded to our legal department and we do not expect any reaction before tomorrow."

"What is happening is in accordance with the activities of various groups in the Serbian Orthodox Church," Sonja Biserko, president of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, told Forum 18 in Belgrade. She recalled the demonstrations that disrupted the Anglican Christmas service in an Orthodox chapel in Belgrade last year. She regarded it as "indicative" that the attacks on the Adventists are taking place despite the emergency measures in place since Djindjic's assassination.

"After 12 years of nationalism under Slobodan Milosevic and the last two years of uncontrolled media promotion of the Serbian Orthodox Church, we now have a product of the radicalisation - people who are coming out and expressing the atmosphere created," she maintained. "They hate ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, but no one is pointing out how we got here. Our young generation has its own value system that is, as is being proved here, incompatible with our plans for a new, European Serbia. These are merely the logical consequences."

Serbia's Adventist community remains highly concerned at the latest attacks, declaring that it feels "threatened and insecure" more than ever. "Despite our regular reports of these and similar incidents, measures were not adequate, nor were we protected adequately," a 16 April Adventist statement declared. "Media statements, articles and texts of various kinds in which a 'finger of hate' is pointed at us, a recognised religious community, is often a cause of hostilities and creates antagonism that turns people away from our Church."

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