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SERBIA: Stabbing, beatings, arson and slander against religious minorities

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

Recent incidents of violence against Serbia's religious minorities have included the wounding by stabbing of Hare Krishna devotee Zivota Milanovic in the town of Jagodina and the beating of two Muslim conscripts during their military service, Forum 18 News Service notes in its latest listing of verbal and physical attacks on religious minority communities. Places of worship – particularly Adventist churches – have been vandalised and subjected to arson attacks, while the authorities have threatened to destroy a Romanian Orthodox church. A Serbian Orthodox bishop was quoted in the press as threatening to make sure that whatever the Old Calendarist Orthodox build will be torn down.

Concern continues among human rights activists and members of religious minorities in Serbia at ongoing verbal and physical attacks on religious minority communities. In Forum 18 News Service's listing of attacks between May and early September 2005, the most alarming incident is the serious wounding of painter and Hare Krishna devotee Zivota Milanovic in the town of Jagodina 150 kms (95 miles) south of Belgrade. He was stabbed in the chest while walking on the street late at night on 11/12 July. His three unknown attackers told him he should be burnt at the stake. "This happened because of his faith – it was because he is Serbian but not Orthodox," one Hare Krishna devotee told Forum 18. Four years ago Milanovic was severely beaten and later the same year also stabbed for being a Hare Krishna devotee. Two Muslim conscripts were beaten in early summer while performing military service.

A number of places of worship have been vandalised and subjected to arson attacks, particularly Seventh-day Adventist churches, while the authorities have renewed threats to demolish the Romanian Orthodox Church in the village of Malajnica near Negotin in eastern Serbia (see F18News 20 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=589). Old Calendarist Orthodox told the press that Serbian Orthodox Bishop Chrisostom (Stolic) of Zica had threatened that he will make sure that whatever they build will be torn down.

These continuing attacks come despite claims to Forum 18 by Serbia's religion minister Milan Radulovic that such attacks rarely lead to anything more than "minimal" damage and that these attacks have halved in the past year (see F18News 8 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=646).

For the list below of incidents between May and early September 2005, Forum 18 has gathered information directly from religious communities, except where as indicated information is from published sources.

25 May 2005 – Muslim conscript Semso Masovic was beaten in Pozarevac during military service by a group of fellow soldiers because of his religious and ethnic background. He was released from the army on the grounds of being "temporary incapable". Masovic testified that another Muslim soldier, Mevludin Kujevic, was also beaten in the same barracks. The army issued a statement that Masovic was ill before joining the army, and that the incident was just a "regular breakdown of military discipline" and "was not motivated by the ethnic background of the soldier". Belgrade-based NGO Youth Initiative for Human Rights submitted criminal charges against perpetrators (Glas islama July 2005, Danas 19 August 2005).

10 June 2005 – Graffiti at the newly-refurbished mosque in Nis praising Bosnian Serb general Ratko Mladic for the massacre of Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica in 1995. Graffiti was covered with new paint the same day (B92, 10 June 2005).

5/6 July 2005 – Several tombstones at Catholic graveyard in Srpski Itebej near Zrenjanin severely damaged and levelled to the ground (Glas javnosti, 11 July 2005).

10 July 2005 – Main square in Smederevo sprayed with anti-Semitic graffiti, swastikas and Nazi slogans. Belgrade-based Beta agency reported that recently more graffiti was sprayed on the post office and cheese market (Vecernje novosti, 11 July 2005).

11/12 July 2005 – Painter and Hare Krishna devotee Zivota Milanovic stabbed in chest by three unknown attackers while walking in the town of Jagodina during night. "They told me they are Serbian knights, that I am not a good Serb, and they threatened to burn me at the stake," Milanovic told the press (Glas javnosti 17 July 2005, Forum 18 information).

15/16 July 2005 – Unknown perpetrators set entrance door on fire at Adventist church in Rakovica, near Belgrade. Fire was detected by neighbours and soon brought under control. Heavy door on the building that is under state protection were destroyed.

19 July 2005 – Police arrested two men in Smederevo for inciting religious and ethnic intolerance by writing anti-Semitic graffiti, "Inflation comes from the Jews", "Death to Zionism", "Riot against Jews", swastikas and other symbols. They were sentenced to 30 days in prison.

21 July 2005 – Windows of entrance door broken at Backa Palanka Adventist Church. Attacks repeated on 13 August and also 21 August. Police reported that the perpetrators were identified and that the criminal charges were filed against them for "damaging property".

25/26 July 2005 - Kersko graveyard in Subotica desecrated.

12 August 2005 – Several attacks on Adventist Church in Sivac resulting in broken windows and graffiti. Reported to police, perpetrators unknown.

14 August 2005 – Representatives of Serbian Orthodox Church in Dubasnica attacked Old Calendarist Orthodox as "a great evil for the Serbian Orthodox Church since they do not recognise any religious community and request rebaptism for those who join them". The Old Calendarists claim that Serbian Orthodox Bishop Chrisostom (Stolic) of Zica threatened that he will make sure that whatever they build will be torn down (Danas 10 August, Blic 14 August).

18 August 2005 – Oasis Pentecostal Romany children's centre in Jagodina attacked in the Belgrade daily Vecernje novosti as "sectarian" since it does not perform Orthodox rites. In the article, local Orthodox priests claimed that they know it is a "sect, since it is obvious that it is a religious organisation that rebaptises children".

26 August 2005 – Local Romanian Orthodox Church priest in Malajnica, Fr Bojan Aleksandrovic, informed by municipality that since he had not destroyed the chapel himself, it will be destroyed by municipality at his expense. The case of the chapel is pending at the higher court.

27/28 August 2005 – Windows broken at regional headquarters of Adventist Church in Novi Sad.

3 September 2005 – Anti-Semitic graffiti sprayed on Novi Sad synagogue during celebration of Days of Jewish Culture in Serbia.

5 September 2005 – Further anti-Semitic graffiti daubed on walls in Smederovo.

7 September 2005 – Pancevacke novine weekly in Pancevo denigrated members of the Mormon and Jehovah Witness communities as "false benefactors who under a mask are offering secrets of 'the way of happiness and body' and bring their 'victims' to complete disaster, loss of their houses and apartments, friends, family and 'almost sanity'". This is the second media attack, following one on 24 August criticising the police for not reacting against "sects" (Pancevacke novine, 24 August and 7 September).

7 September 2005 – Dozen of graves desecrated when wooden crosses removed and piled upside-down at Sencansko Catholic graveyard in Subotica. Subotica's mayor condemned perpetrators, calling on police and prosecutor's office for a "quick and efficient response" (Danas 8 September, Subotica mayor's office 7 September).

(END)

For a personal commentary by a religious freedom lawyer arguing that Serbia should not follow Austria's system of dividing religious communities into different categories with differing legal rights, see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=403

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

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

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka

