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Bosnia-Herzegovina: Political violence a severe setback for minority returns

Violent demonstrations in Republika Srpska - the Bosnian Serb entity - over the past few days, may set back progress made in the return of minorities over the past few years, Amnesty International said today.

Violence broke out in the towns of Trebinje and Banja Luka after Serb protestors targeted ceremonies held by local Muslim communities. Reports indicate that these incidents were highly organized and orchestrated by local hard-line politicians, including those of the Serb Democratic Party (SDS).

"This violence takes place in a climate of virtual impunity in which the perpetrators are rarely or inadequately prosecuted following most incidents of return-related violence," the organization said.

"Law enforcement officials should ensure adequate protection of all citizens against violence, and should conduct immediate and thorough investigations into all such incidents so that minorities can return to a safe and secure environment."

These incidents signal that the national authorities of Bosnia-Herzegovina, in particular those of the Republika Srpska, are not able to guarantee all of its citizens freedom of religious expression, as they should under the Dayton Peace Agreement.

The NATO-led Stabilization Forces (SFOR) should respond appropriately to these incidents of violence against life and person, as they have been mandated to do under Annex 1 of the Dayton Peace Agreement. In a press conference following the disturbances, a spokesperson from the NATO-led Stabilization Forces (SFOR) stated that there was in fact a special SFOR unit tasked to deal with crowd control, but failed to clarify why this unit had not been used during the riots in Banja Luka.

Amnesty International is also concerned about reports that a Banja Luka independent radio station and the Bosnian Serb Helsinki Committee, which had condemned the violence, have started to receive threats.

Background

On 5 May Serb demonstrators broke up a ceremony to mark the start of work to reconstruct the Osman Pasa mosque in Trebinje in south-eastern Republika Srpska, which was attended by local and international officials. According to eye-witnesses, including International Police Task Force (IPTF) monitors, local police failed to take adequate measures to protect those attending the

ceremony, who had rocks and bottles thrown at them. A local international observer was reportedly beaten and punched by protestors and had to undergo medical treatment.

On Monday 7 May a crowd of several thousands of Serb protestors broke through a police cordon surrounding the opening ceremony of the rebuilding of the completely destroyed Ferhadija mosque in the centre of Banja Luka, the Republika Srpska capital. The 16th century mosque was blown up in 1993, and formal arrangements for its reconstruction had only just been made, following a decision by the Human Rights Chamber in 2000 to order the rebuilding of seven destroyed mosques in Banja Luka. Over 200 people, including international and local officials and religious dignitaries, as well as Bosniac pre-war inhabitants of Banja Luka who had come to witness the ceremony had to seek refuge in the nearby Islamic Community building as the mob started throwing stones at them, destroying several cars. Nearly 60 people, including 18 local police officers were injured in the event, some of them seriously.

Local police have arrested scores of individuals suspected of being involved in the riots in both towns.

In an apparent reaction to the disruption of the religious ceremonies, two Bosniac men reportedly threw a hand grenade at an orthodox church in Sanski Most in the Federation in the evening of 7 May, and were subsequently arrested and criminally charged.

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