

RTRS: May 24, 2001 - 20 hrs Transcript of an interview given to RTRS on 8th May by the Reis - ul - Ulema, efendi Mustafa Cerić

Note: the interview was recorded in Sarajevo
(Provided by Banja Luka office)

Q: Mr. Cerić, welcome to our programme. Would you please, comment on the most recent events in Banja Luka and Trebinje.

Cerić: Bismillah (plus few more words in Arabic language). First of all, I want to send a salam (greetings) to all the Muslims in Banja Luka and to tell them that I share their feelings, and I wish to our brother who is still hospital to recover soon. I hope that the building of the Islamic community is now free so that they can enter, move out the stones thrown and if possible, begin to live a normal life.

If I remember correctly, you have asked me to record this interview in Banja Luka, but – here we are – talking in Sarajevo and I am very happy that you've been able to come here and of course, it would have been much better if we could have done this in Banja Luka. As far as I remember, we agreed to do the interview after the ceremony of laying of the cornerstone of the Ferhat Pasha's Mosque in Banja Luka.

The first question that should be asked is why should religious objects be reconstructed or rebuilt? Religious objects should be reconstructed because of the fact that somebody destroyed them. In this particular case, the Ferhat Pasha's mosque was destroyed in dawn, on 7th May 1993, at 03:05 hrs. And not only that it was destroyed, but every single stone was taken away, placed somewhere – that happened not only with the mosque, but also with the grave stones, clock – tower and everything else. That could not happen accidentally, that could not be an incident – the only way it could happen was with the knowledge, plan and organization of the authorities that were in Banja Luka at that time and obviously, they are still in power. It happened not only with Ferhadija but also with all other mosques in and around Banja Luka and there were 16. Therefore, preventing the reconstruction of these mosques says that those who destroyed them, now do not allow reconstruction. Thus, what we have here is a crime and those who committed it, committed a crime against God, a crime against people who cherish certain religious objects in their hearts. We are not the same. Those here who defended the Orthodox Church in Sarajevo (you can go and see that it was preserved) – and we had a war here, grenades were falling, people were getting killed here in Sarajevo – people who had reason to be angry – they were coming to me, asking can they revenge the Ferhat Pasha's mosque, I told them that if they do so, they would not destroy a church, that they would destroy a mosque. That is no strength at all, revenge is a sign of weakness and tolerance is the highest level of power and in such a situation we were showing the power of tolerance and strength towards the Orthodox Church. Not only that – when the Dabro – bosanski Episcopate Nikolaj returned to Sarajevo from Zadar to serve the orthodox community (he was sent here exactly because of the fact that he did not participate in the war, he was clean and no objections could be addressed to him) we have intervened and he was approved 500 000 DM to reconstruct his residence in Sarajevo.

You see, we are not the same. We are not the same – those who are in Sarajevo – Muslims and those who are in Banja Luka – Orthodox.

What you just said – we are not the same – can you clarify that a bit more.

Well, we are not the same due to the fact that there is Serb – Orthodox fascism within the Serb people, and it manifested when the mosques were destroyed, including Ferhat Pasha's mosque and Aladza mosque. We have not heard the condemnation of these acts from the Orthodox Church – which should have prevented it from happening. If not preventing, at least to condemn and the letter written by the Patriarch Pavle to the Belgrade mufti, saying that he was sorry about the Ferhat Pasha's mosque was just funny, and I would say, very provocative, coming from such a high ranking dignitary of the Orthodox Church, to simplify things like that. Simply said, we are not the same due to the fact that destroying mosques in an atmosphere where there was no war, was an act with premeditation, a crime and we who were here, preserving the orthodox church – that is the difference as a difference between the good and the evil. Here you have good and there – you have evil. I wish I could speak differently, but the truth obliges me to say what I want to say.

Why is the reconstruction of mosques politicized? Mosques in Kozarac, Brcko, Nevesinje were built with no problems. Why now, suddenly, such issues become political? The Islamic community praised these events in Kozarac and other places.

We praise what should be praised and we condemn what needs to be condemned. What we have seen in Kozarac – first of all, there were no RS politicians and Serb people and it was organized in the same way as this ceremony. There was a representative of Mr. Klein, Ambassadors of the Islamic countries – we were there when the mosque was already built, to confirm it in a way, and also – liaison person was one officer from the French Embassy and probably, he was reassuring people in Banja Luka that they should do it, to show good will and they did it as a political game, to show how good they are that now they allow the reconstruction of the mosque that they have destroyed – there is no politicization about Ferhadija. How can we talk about politics 5, 6 years after Dayton, decision of the Human Rights Chamber to issue the permit?

What Dodik could have done and did not and what Ivanic can do now – I told him that, we met twice – the first thing is that he comes to me to Sarajevo and says – you are welcome to come and rebuild Ferhadija, I apologize on behalf of those good Serbs (if there are any) that the mosque was destroyed in front of the eyes of the whole world. That is the only reasonable thing to do. But we needed 6 years, to play a game – whether we would get the permit or not, today they say yes, tomorrow no, tons of paper, and after we get the urbanism permission and special permission to approach the site. We had big problems to approach the site, a problem when the mufti walks out with ahmedija (religious cap). I know about that, I came to Banja Luka right after the signing of the Dayton and I have seen in which condition people were. So, for them – to go out to the street was risky and dangerous. Thus – that is the authority – somebody raised that people in this way, somebody thought them to hate, somebody thought them to be aggressive and that was not me – they do not come to my mosque – they go to a church, to a school, they read some books, probably Njegos' "Gorski Vijenac", which is the book with the highest concentration of hate that I have ever seen in the entire world.

Now imagine that you raise a child – and we have an information that the Bosniac students were told not to come to school to get some rest, and students in Banja Luka were told to collect the stones so that they can throw them at the ceremony.

What politics? Who is doing that and why? What is that that we from the Islamic community politicize? Should we refuse the kind offer of Mr. Miler who was involved in this, thinking that it would help Banja Luka, people who live there, RS, the Serb entity. And Mr. Hand who, for sure, could have been some place else, should he suffer this barbaric behavior? And what about Mr. Klein, ambassadors from the Islamic countries and others? What good would it bring to me or Mr. Klein to politicize such a thing. Situation is quite opposite: Mr. Radisic, Mr. Sarovic and Mr. Ivanic politicized it. Why? Now, how can they explain to the people which they led to the war over a genocide, over concentration camps, rapes, that the situation is not what they were saying back in 1993, it would be. They were saying that they would cleanse the Turks (what Njegos also said in his book), but – they have not cleansed the Turks. After all, the Turks are coming back. Turks are building mosques again and now, how to face that people and say – you know what, it was easier – it is easier to do the same as Neron – he burnt Rome and said that the Christians did it. Is that right?

So, it is much easier for Radisic to say, – well – you know what? and make it all relative, instead he should have – as a human being, if he had any humanity and decency within himself, to say – people, this is not the way to do it. Can you imagine – the Reis is coming from Sarajevo and he is expected to say nice words – I wish I could read what I prepared, but I'll do it in some other place, I'll say what I planned to say in Banja Luka, we should say: what happened, happened, nobody can deny that Ferhadija was destroyed, no one can say so, not even the ones who destroyed it. So, that is destroyed. But – the clock can not go backwards. It can only go forward and exactly what we need to think about is how to achieve a state of peace and reconciliation, which would happen and go towards a better situation for Moslems who – Moslems, Catholics, Orthodox, Jews – are hungry, who have no clothes to wear, who have no jobs, young people are leaving BiH and RS, 'cause they have no perspective. Instead, Mr. Sarovic, Mr. Radisic and Mr. Ivanic are organizing stoning, like in the stone age – against the people who came unarmed, old women wearing traditional clothes, old men and little kids – and there were also the Serb children who were thought by someone – the orthodox church or someone else – they were collecting stones (we have seen it with our own eyes) and gave them to their fathers to throw it on those who came to attend the ceremony.

Instead that Ivanic, as Willie Brandt did, goes public and apologizes, and says – it was a mistake, there was a war, we apologize, let's start a new life. You cannot run away from Moslems, wherever you go, you will find a mosque,

there is no way that you can cleanse the RS from the non- Serb element. There is always going to be someone who is going to bother you. So, the problem is not in politics, the problem is in an internal disease that the Serb - Orthodox people are suffering now.

This is the best advice and the best thing that could be said to them because you know, a drug addict, when on drugs, would never admit it. They never want to admit that they are sick and the same is when a person is sick with fascism, terrorism and hatred, of course, he would not admit it but the whole world can see that this is it - of course, the person who is sick, can not understand it. And for as long as the Serb - Orthodox population does not understand that there is no alternative but to look deep inside themselves, to cure from within, to understand that we can and have to live here, as neighbors, we have to share our destiny. Until that happens, there will be no peace in Balkans, and if there were no peace for all others, there would be no peace for them as well.

Can you comment on the events that followed in Sarajevo?

You see, I have not seen it - I just heard that that was happening in Sarajevo. Most probably, that was a reaction, which had no justification. There is no evil that can be justified by some other evil act. We should fight the evil with the power of good - I do not want to answer your question by saying - that what happened is understandable, as people were irritated, they saw that women were stoned, it was like seeing one's mother suffering it. I can only thank God that I can talk with you now, as I was in life danger in Banja Luka. The God wanted me to stay alive, unfortunately for those over there and fortunately for the people here. People were irritated and wanted to show that.

However, what I heard, what some people were saying about the Serbs, something that was not in the spirit of our religion - Islam, I not only condemn but I also undertook certain measures and said today in public that no one has a right to frighten the Serbs in Sarajevo on behalf of Muslims and Islam in such a way. So, Serbs who live here in Sarajevo are not here because I allow them to be, they are here because they should be here. What could have been heard - that is really related to irresponsible individuals, provocateurs, who probably - I have no proof, but I believe - were under influence of some intelligence services and they were used to make things relative, when you compare, one can say - what happened in Banja Luka and these here are the same, Of course, if we make a little sin here, they make it as big as mountain and sin made in Banja Luka which is as big as mountain is made to be just a little thing. And absolutely - I do not say this because I am afraid of someone or to court anyone - quite the contrary- these young people that I know here - would not be satisfied with my statement, but exactly because of that I want to say that it was not Islam, that these are not Muslims, that such things should and must not happen in Sarajevo, regardless of what is happening in Banja Luka. And regardless of what Ivanic would say - is he going to offer some rhetoric again - I heard that some 20 people were identified but no names were given - why? Because - Sarovic, Ivanic and Radisic have a bigger obligation towards the war criminals than the victims of the crime. Well, these obligations that they have, they are prisoners of those obligations and in order to set themselves free, they need to be brave, but obviously, none of them - Radisic, Ivanic and Sarovic have neither courage nor moral to go public and say clearly - with no if -s.

I was listening to the Interior Minister who said that the people and property would be secured. Also, he said that the incidents can happen and the Serbs understood that as an invitation - come and you can stone and prevent the ceremony.

You have said that what happened in Sarajevo was an action of individuals. On the other hand, you have strongly criticized the entire Serb people?

I said individual and any individual who speaks that way would be prevented to do that in Sarajevo. At least such rhetoric related to Serbs that they should be afraid here, will be sanctioned. I say that clearly and publicly. I have not heard and representative of the Orthodox Church who went public and say: Gentlemen, Orthodox people, (it was them who did it in Banja Luka, not some people from Mars, them who go to the church, who show three fingers, who removed the flag and placed the Serb one, who brought pig's head) - I think it required courage, guts, humanity, and show up on TV - the same way as I do now and say - Brothers, orthodox people, it is not good what you are doing, that is against God, against people, against law, against everything. I have not heard that and that gives me the right to say that this smells like fascism, which is cherished in the Orthodox Church, under this or that influence. How would you call it?

I tell you now, as Reis - ul - Ulema, the Head of Muslims that the attack on the Orthodox Church in Sanski Most was an act against Muslims, not the orthodox. I went public on this today.

I do not know where the officials of the Orthodox church are – are they in Banja Luka, are there any? I hear nothing and silence is a sign of approval. In other words, the Orthodox Church too, stands behind yesterday's events and now you tell me that I politicize things – that have nothing to do with politics. It is related to the issue of human rights and life as we were endangered in Banja Luka, our lives were in danger – what else should happen and make the Orthodox Church to say that it is a sin.

What about Sanski Most?

I heard that somebody threw a bomb. I requested the authorities to investigate and prevent similar incidents in the future. I do not want to tell you that it was the reaction – such reactions can not be justified, not even with what happened in Banja Luka. Here in BiH, orthodox churches are older than all of us, and the same is with catholic churches and mosques, and it is our obligation to preserve and protect them – if you respect what is not yours, you earn the same respect, but you cannot expect someone whom you are attacking to respect and protect your rights.

We should all wake up. What happened in Banja Luka did not confuse nor discourage us – we will, if it is God's will, make Ferhadija, in spite of Njegos, "Gorski Vijenac", those kids who threw stones and we will live for as long as God determined.