

High Representative appalled at outbreak of violence in Banja Luka

The High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, is appalled at the outbreak of violence in Banja Luka today, which has been organised to prevent the laying of the corner stone of the Ferhadija Mosque. He urges the RS authorities to bring the situation under control. This is the second time in three days that small groups of extremists have managed to disrupt ceremonies marking the beginning of the reconstruction of mosques in the RS.

It is clearly the responsibility of the RS authorities to provide security, ensure the rule of law in the RS, and to live up to their commitment to protect religious freedom. They have failed at that: today's violence appears to be the result of a muddled response from the RS Government to Saturday's incidents in Trebinje, when a similar ceremony was sabotaged, of the complete silence of the RS Presidency with regard to those events, and inadequate security measures. By their failure to respond appropriately, the RS authorities have allowed an extremist minority to terrorise the rest of the population.

"I am shocked that the RS still appears to be a place with no rule of law, no civilised behaviour and no religious freedom," the High Representative said. "Small groups of extremists are allowed to spread ultra-nationalism, intolerance and violence. I hold the authorities responsible for this frightening state of affairs."

The High Representative has spoken twice with RS Prime Minister Mladen Ivanic today and urged him to undertake all measures to bring the situation in Banja Luka under control.

The High Representative is aware that RS President Mirko Sarovic, Vice-President Dragan Cavic and RS National Assembly Speaker Dragan Kalinic have tried to address the demonstrating crowd, but considers this to be a step that has come too late. It does not acquit the RS authorities of their responsibility for the inadequate response to the violence in Trebinje on Saturday. The High Representative is also in constant touch with COMSFOR General Michael Dodson and the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary General to BiH, Jacques Paul Klein, in order to co-ordinate the response of the international community.

This morning, several thousand people rallied at the site of the Ferhadija Mosque. Some started to hurl abuse and throw eggs and stones at domestic and international dignitaries and Islamic Community leaders who were gathering to attend the corner stone laying ceremony, scheduled for 11.30 hours. Most of the guests managed to escape to the nearby Islamic Community Centre. Several buses carrying additional guests were also stoned and reportedly later set on fire. The car of BiH Foreign Minister Zlatko Lagumdzija and several other cars were smashed. In the ensuing clashes between local police and demonstrators, several people have been injured, including journalists, guests and policemen.

The High Representative appeals to the RS authorities to do their utmost to calm the situation in Banja Luka and then take all steps necessary to investigate and prosecute the incidents. Without prosecution and punishment of the perpetrators, such incidents will remain the rule and not the exception.

Background: The Islamic Community has long sought to rebuild the Ferhat Pasha Mosque in Banja Luka, commonly known as the Ferhadija Mosque, which was destroyed in an act of barbarism in 1993 and was one of the most precious mosques in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In June 1999, the Human Rights Chamber, to which the Islamic Community had turned in March 1997, ordered the RS

authorities “to swiftly grant the applicant, as requested, the necessary permits” for the reconstruction of Ferhadija and six other mosques in Banja Luka. However, only recently did the RS authorities issue the urban permit allowing the reconstruction of the Ferhadija Mosque. The ceremony planned for today was to mark the beginning of the reconstruction.

The High Representative considers the facilitation of the reconstruction of the Ferhadija Mosque a litmus test for the authorities to demonstrate their commitment to the Dayton Peace Agreement, reconciliation, return and mutual respect. When the Steering Board met at the level of Political Directors on 7 December last year, it called upon the parties to “fully support and facilitate the reconstruction or repair of all significant historical and religious monuments and places of worship,” of which Ferhadija Mosque is one of the most famous.