



REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

**OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Working Session 12 & 13 – Freedom of religion or belief**

Statement by the Delegation of the Republic of Serbia

Warsaw, 29 September - 10 October 2008

Mr. Moderator,

The Provisional Institutions of Self-Government of the **South Serbian province of Kosovo** unilaterally and illegally declared its independence on 17 February this year. This was an act that did not solve a problem, but created many new ones. All of them have their immediate impact on the situation on the ground, on the daily life of the people in Kosovo, in particular on that of the non-Albanian communities that do not accept the illegal independence, and especially on the Serbs living in the enclaves scattered throughout the Serbian province.

It is uncontested, even by those countries, who favor the independence of Kosovo, that the protection of the Serbian cultural and religious heritage in Kosovo and Metohija should be in the focus of the international community's efforts, under the guidance of UNMIK, to relieve the worrying living conditions for non-Albanians, to restore safety and security, to eliminate discrimination and to establish the rule of law in Kosovo.

Unfortunately, there are many cases occurring virtually on a daily bases that tell us a different story. Allow me to focus here and now only on those that threaten the free and unhampered exercise of the freedom of religion and belief. The most visible and obvious sign – quasi a symbol – of the limitations put upon the Serbian Orthodox community in Kosovo in this regard is the fact that many, especially the most valuable of the approximately 1300 Serbian orthodox churches and monasteries in Kosovo, even today have to be protected by barbed wire and KFOR troops, which is a unique situation not only in Europe, but I believe in the world.

Our churches and monasteries in Kosovo have been the subject of an orchestrated campaign of cultural cleansing that continues until the present day. As recently as July this year the remains of a Serbian church in downtown Djakovica, burned down during the March 2004 pogroms, were whipped from the face of the earth, in broad daylight, and in plain sight of the local Albanian population. The Albanian-run municipality decided to build a park on its remnants, and the international community did not prevent that.

The bretheren of the Visoki Dečani Monastery, one of the oldest and most important Serbian Orthodox monasteries, who live in total isolation and in constant fear caused by incidents of intimidation that occur on a regular basis, including mortar attacks, see themselves exposed to public lynch when they request their rights to be implemented, one of them being the right to property.

Serbian Cemeteries are being vandalized throughout Kosovo and Metohija, and due to the lack of freedom of movement buses have to be organized on religious holidays to enable the expelled and internally displaced Serbian population to safely visit the graves of their dearest or to attend the divine service in one of the churches or monasteries.

Mr. Moderator,

There is not one reason or argument that can justify the existing unique constraints to the exercise of the freedom of religion of the Serbian Orthodox population in Kosovo, constraints that are not the result of legal limitations, but the consequence of ethnic intolerance that has gone unpunished for years. As the report “Four years later. Follow up of March 2004 Riots Cases before the Kosovo Criminal Justice System”, published by the OSCE Mission in Kosovo in July this year states, the low number of prosecutions of ethnic violence against Serbs in Kosovo “fails to adequately fight impunity and send a clear message that ethnic violence such as that of March 2004 will not be tolerated”. The international community has to finally recognize that circumstance and take *appropriate* measures.

Thank you, Mr. Moderator