



6th Forum on Minority Issues

"Beyond freedom of religion or belief: Guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities"
Item 2 – Protection of the existence and prevention of violence against religious minorities

Madam Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,

It is our pleasure to address the 6th Session of the Forum for Minority Issues.

Whereby it is common to ask states to raise their standards for the protection of minority rights or to implement existing obligations, it is less common to ask from international bodies to protect basic human rights (of endangered ethnic groups) in the territories under international protection.

This is why, on this occasion, our delegation would like to share our concerns regarding the situation of the Serbian population living in the Province of Kosovo and Metohija, which is, according to the UN SC Resolution 1244, under jurisdiction of the UN administration.

In Serbia, especially in Kosovo and Metohija, cultural and religious heritage are strongly intertwined and the Serbian Orthodox Church forms an essential constituent of the national identity. In Kosovo and Metohija, freedom of religion is intrinsically linked to the freedom of movement and the right to freely exercise religion is inextricably linked to the very right to life.

Out of around 1.300 Orthodox churches, monasteries and other sacral objects, in the last twelve years, around 150 religious sites were destroyed, damaged or vandalized. More than 10.000 icons and church's artistic or liturgical objects were destroyed or looted. Over 250 Serbian orthodox graveyard and 5.261 tombstones were destroyed or damaged, and more that 50 cemeteries all tombstones are completely destroyed.

In the 2004 riots, 19 heritage sites were destroyed, out of which 6 monuments of the first category monuments dating back from XIV, XV and XVI century, as well as 16 churches, which is 35 religious monuments in total.

Madam Chairperson,

The UN SG Report on UNMIK of 4 February 2013 notes the continuation of incidents affecting minority communities in Kosovo, primarily persons of Serbian nationality, consisting of theft, arson, illegal seizing and occupation of houses, looting and vandalism of religious sites and cemeteries. These developments indicate that, despite progress achieved in the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina,

ethically and religiously motivated violence in Kosovo and Metohija still exists. The perception among the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija, as well as among the returnees and the IDP's, is that all incidents are carried out to signal to them a message of being unwelcome, to deter returns and to encourage their departure.

Protection of human rights safeguarded by international covenants, including those related to respect of rights of religious groups and fight against discrimination of religious communities, represents the ultimate responsibility of international presence in Kosovo. In this line, our delegation would like to point out that restoration and effective protection of Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo and Metohija represents an imperative for the international community and local authorities, as it is a precondition for reconciliation and reaching the sustainable solution that would include guarantees of respecting the rights of all people, irrespective of its ethnicity.

Thank you for your attention.