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INTERCONFESSIONAL STATEMENT ON KOSOVO

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service

The leaders of the Serbian Orthodox Church (Bishop ARTEMIJE), the Roman Catholic Church (Bishop Monsignor MARKO SOPI), and the Islamic Community of Kosovo (Mufti Dr REDZEP BOJA) met in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) on 8 February 2000, and issued a joint statement regarding the slow and inefficient implementation of the Peace Agreement for Kosovo and Metohija.

In the statement, the religious leaders publicly address believers, local authorities and the representatives of the international community in Kosovo and Metohija, expressing their desire of the establishment of a permanent peace founded on truth, justice and coexistence.

Accepting the differences between their religious confessions, the spiritual leaders emphasise the identical values that all respect, in particular the value of a human being as a gift from God. They recognise that their confessions, each in their own way, require respect for basic human rights, and indicate that the violation of these rights is a violation not only of human laws but also of God's law.

In six points, the statement condemns violations of human rights: hate crimes based on ethnic or religious diversity, the desecration of religious objects, the expulsion of people from their land and the prevention of their return, acts of revenge, and the misuse of the media for spreading hatred. In conclusion the three leaders invite all people of good will to take responsibility for their own acts. We should act toward others in the same manner we would like them to act toward us.'

This statement came as a pre-text to a long-awaited event: Serbs are expected to gain representation on local authority bodies in Kosovo on Saturday 11 February 2000. One of the prominent figures on the Serbian side expected to join the ruling council, on which the Albanians have the majority of seats, is Bishop Artemije of Raska and Prizren Diocese, one of the signatories of the statement. The priests and monks of the Serbian Orthodox Church were already trying to ease the tension between two nationalities, the Serbs and the Albanians, during the armed conflicts before and during the NATO military campaign (March-June 1999). Even today, more than a hundred refugees live in the Serbian Orthodox Ss. Cyril and Methodius Seminary in Prizren, including three ethnic Turks and seven Albanians. During the last six months at least one hundred Albanians have sought refuge in the Seminary, mostly escaping reprisals from Albanian nationalists, because they have refused to join or support the KLA.

It is interesting to note that while this meeting was being held in Sarajevo (in the course of a meeting of the Inter-religious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina to which the religious leaders had been invited), a similar meeting took place in Belgrade, also on 8 February. Several interested religious groups, including representatives of the Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, Protestant and Jewish communities in Serbia, held an important business meeting to discuss the final drafts for the founding of a future inter-religious tolerance centre in Belgrade. Although the centre is not yet open or registered with the authorities, the representatives of the interested parties have been meeting and talking together for more than

two years, and have reached the point of agreement on the aims of the future centre. A constitutional session is planned for the end of February, and is already arousing interest among believers of various denominations. The work of the centre is scheduled to start after the legal formalities are concluded; these are expected to involve no difficulties or delays.
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