

Bosnia: Ethnic Violence on the Rise

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Victory of nationalist parties in recent elections may have led to an increase in extremist activity.

The arrest of a Muslim man accused of murdering three Bosnian Croats highlights the rise of ethnically motivated violence since last October's elections.

Muamer Topalovic, a 26-year-old Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim), is due to stand trial in Mostar at the end of the February. It is alleged that he broke into the home of a Bosnian Croat family in the village of Kostajnica near Konjic, some 80 km south of Sarajevo, and opened fire with an AK-47 assault rifle.

Pensioner Andjelko Andjelic and his daughters Zorica and Mara lost their lives in the incident. Andjelic's son Marinko was seriously wounded but survived.

Topalovic could face a prison sentence of more than 20 years on charges of premeditated murder if found guilty.

The Christmas Eve attack on the Andjelic family - Bosnian Croat refugees who returned home to the Bosniak-dominated region after the end of the war - sparked a nationwide wave of condemnation.

Srdjan Dizdarevic, of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia-Herzegovina, said the number of such incidents in the region has significantly increased in the wake of the October 2002 general elections, which saw the three main nationalist parties seize power after a poor turnout by voters.

In the north-western Republika Srpska town of Prijedor alone, more than 20 ethnically motivated incidents have been recorded since October 2002. In the first 10 months of the year, only two such attacks had taken place.

"It looks like the election results have encouraged criminal and nationalistic elements in Bosnia-Herzegovina," said Dizdarevic.

Western officials and agencies could not confirm nor deny the existence of any such trend, partly because policing functions were transferred from the United Nations to the European Union on December 31, 2002, and statistics are not readily available.

Topalovic first came to public attention in early 2002. He gave an interview to Sarajevo's independent weekly newspaper *Slobodna Bosna*, in which he described how he travelled to Serbia in October 1998 hoping to assassinate former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, only to be arrested by border police.

As a result, he spent more than three years in prisons in Sabac and Sremska Mitrovica, where he claimed he was severely beaten by prison guards.

Topalovic's court-appointed defence lawyer Aid Glavovic told IWPR, "His life story is a classic example of post-traumatic stress disorder", adding that the accused was only 15 years of age when the Bosnian war

started in 1992.

However, others are pointing the finger at the influence of radical Islamic organisations, whose lectures Topalovic is believed to have attended.

In 1996, Topalovic joined the Vehabije - Muslims who follow a radical form of Islam, at odds with Bosnia's more tolerant Ottoman Muslim heritage. The group takes its name from the Wahabbi sect, a Saudi-based movement, whose adherents see themselves as the only true Muslims.

Two organisations promote Wahabbi Islam in Bosnia - Active Islamic Youth and Al Furkan. At the beginning of the police investigation, Topalovic apparently told officers that he was a member of both - a claim that has since been denied by the organisations.

Mustafa Cerić, the leader of Bosnia's Muslim community, was among the first to condemn the murder of innocent Croat returnees as "a crime against the faith of Islam", and called on young people to "stay away from superstition, false books, and teachers who do not want to understand the authentic life in our homeland".

Whatever the motive for the killings, much of the country briefly united in condemning the violent nationalism that appears to be on the rise since October. Even Topalovic's father, Avdija, joined the chorus. "He is not my son any more. I do not want to hear about him ever again," he said.

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