

Bosnia: Papal Boost for Banja Luka

Author: [Gordana Katana](#)

Pontiff's trip to town scarred by ethnic cleansing seen as opportunity to cast it in positive light.

For days, the staccato of hammers, the buzzing of chainsaws and the roaring of bulldozers have ruined the noon siesta in Petricevac, a suburb of Banja Luka.

The din is being made by scores of workers sprucing up village roads, street lights and putting the finishing touches to the wooden stage where Pope John Paul II will celebrate Mass on June 22.

Not even the stifling heat wave scorching Bosnia-Herzegovina in recent weeks could slow down the works or put a damper on the atmosphere of celebration.

"The deadline was short and the heat lethal, but this wasn't a problem for us because not many cities in the world are visited by the Pope," said local electrician Nevenko, drenched in sweat as he ran power cables across the stage.

Groups of curious bystanders, local villagers and the inevitable journalists milled around as the work neared completion. For some of them, the pontiff's one-day trip is more than just the religious and cultural event of the decade.

"For us it also means an end to isolation. [And] at last we're getting better village roads and street lights," said Andja, who lives near the Petricevac monastery, one of the focal points for the second-ever papal visit to Bosnia.

The significance of the event is seen in the more than five hundred journalists accredited so far - and the number is growing daily.

The preparations for the visit have been tackled at government level, both that of the state and its two entities, the Federation and Republika Srpska, RS, of which Banja Luka is the capital.

The Bosnian Croat member of Bosnia's tripartite presidency, Dragan Covic, who also chairs the Welcoming Committee for the Pope, is happy with "the climate ahead of the Holy Father's visit".

"We're all aware of the complexity of Bosnia and the differing opinions about this event, but we are also united in our desire to welcome the Holy Father in the finest way possible," he said.

The official reason for the pontiff's visit is to beatify the Catholic layman Ivan Merz, who was born in Banja Luka in 1896 and lived there until he finished secondary school. After completing studies in Romance and German literature in Vienna and Paris, Merz moved to Zagreb in 1922 and taught at the Archbishopal Classical School. There, he devoted all his free time to educating Croat youth until he died in 1928.

His work earned him recognition and a reputation as a prominent lay evangelist. The beatification process - the first step on the long road to sainthood - began in 1958 in Zagreb and was completed in Rome on

December 20, 2002.

The Banja Luka of today is a far cry from the town Merz was raised in. Between 1992 and 1995, almost 80,000 Bosnian Croats and Muslims were expelled or forced to flee. The city, dominated by Serbs and their Orthodox religion, is seen by many as a blot on the map of Europe because of the expulsions and its rigid opposition to the return of refugees.

This poor image was reinforced by the massive ethnic riots in the centre of Banja Luka on May 7, 2001. Thousands of Serb hardliners attacked the Muslim faithful and officials, both local and international, who arrived for the ceremonial laying of a new cornerstone at the Ferhad Pasha mosque, an ancient cultural and religious monument destroyed with explosives during the war of the 1990s.

One Muslim was killed in this attack and a number of others were seriously injured.

Many now see the papal trip as an opportunity for Banja Luka to show it is ready to live shoulder to shoulder with people of different faiths.

The town's Catholic bishop, Franjo Komarica, insists that the event will improve the image of Banja Luka, "This visit will also bring people closer together, and show Banja Luka in a new, positive light."

The Association of Refugees and Displaced People from Bosnia-Herzegovina has issued a statement describing event as an encouragement for everyone working to protect human rights and enable the return of all people to their homes.

Only three thousand, mainly elderly, people remain of the 29,000 Catholics who lived in Banja Luka before the war. This is why Bishop Komarica hopes that the Pope's visit will also be "a major turning point in people's way of thinking about returnees".

However, some officials are concerned that any ethnic clashes such as that of 2001, which might occur during the trip, would have disastrous and far-reaching consequences for RS and the whole of Bosnia.

The special security measures now being put in place by all the local institutions and agencies involved are aimed at preventing such an incident.

"It is extremely important that no incidents occur during the visit of Pope John Paul II - that the visit takes place in the atmosphere of a new era of tolerance," said RS president Dragan Cavic on June 6, after a meeting of the Welcoming Committee for the Pope.

"Anyone who sees this as an opportunity for them to express any sentiments which might jeopardise this gathering is making an enormous mistake and could cause incalculable damage to the Republika Srpska and the Serbian people."

RS police chief Radomir Njegus told journalists that the event is seen as a major security risk and that maximum protective measures will be implemented. At least four thousand police will be deployed, he said, and RS is working closely with all the law enforcement agencies across the country and the region. The NATO-led Stabilisation Force SFOR and the European Union Police Mission are also involved.

This attitude is in stark contrast to the behaviour of local police during and after the 2001 riots, when their reluctance to intervene allowed the conflict to spread and take a violent turn.

Although some local Serbs don't see the visit as significant, they all agree on the importance of avoiding any incident.

"I hope everyone will come to their senses and prove that a civilised Banja Luka really exists," said cab driver Zoran. Jovanka, a housewife, said the event means nothing to her. "But this whole event must be peaceful," she added.

Gordana Katana is a VOA correspondent in Banja Luka

Location: Bosnia and Herzegovina

Focus: Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable Training

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/bosnia-papal-boost-banja-luka>