

## SERBIAN AND KOSOVAR WOMEN CALL FOR AN END TO “RELIGIOUS OWNERSHIP” OF KOSOVO’S CHURCHES AND MOSQUES

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June 6, 2006, Prishtina and Washington, DC: Kosovo’s religious sites are not the property of any one religion or ethnic group and should be managed by independent professionals – otherwise they risk provoking ethnic confrontation and violence.

This is the position taken by the Women’s Peace Coalition, a new partnership between Serbian and Kosovar women peace activists that formed in March to monitor the joint Serbian-Kosovar negotiations on Kosovo’s future status.

The new Coalition is a striking example of how women can unite around common concerns across a bitter ethnic divide. It brings together the Kosovo Women’s Network (KWN), a grouping of 85 women’s groups, and the Women in Black Network from Serbia. The two joined forces after KWN and the Women in Black Network publicly criticized the UN and their governments for excluding women from the status negotiations. (See Advocacynet bulletin # 57, March 8, 2006).

The Coalition released its first bulletin on May 26 after negotiators met in Vienna to review Kosovo’s cultural and religious heritage. While the Coalition agrees that all religious sites need protection, it also insists that this will not happen if they are viewed as the exclusive “property” of a religious or ethnic group.

The Coalition calls for the “establishment of independent professional organizations to manage heritage sites owned by religious communities in Kosovo” and says that “direct religious oversight would lead to further degradation of cultural heritage.”

The Coalition also warns the negotiators against using religious sites “as instruments for gaining political clout,” which it says will “deepen divides between ethnic communities and could lead to violence.”

“We are saying - don’t politicize this,” said Igo Rogova, Executive Director of KWN, in an interview. Ms. Rogova added that the lack of transparency in the negotiation process makes it hard to know exactly what has been decided.

The Coalition will meet next on June 20 in Belgrade to review economic issues. As the negotiations progress, the two partners expect to focus on women’s issues and return to their original complaint that women are excluded from the negotiating process.

All seven Kosovo negotiators are men, and KWN maintains that the UN Mission in Kosovo has a mandate under UN Security Council Resolution 1325 “to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels.” Stasa Zajovic, coordinator of Women in Black in Belgrade, said that the Serbian team includes one woman but that her “right-wing policies” do not reflect the views of all women in civil society in Serbia.

Contacted by AP, Jetemir Balaj, chief executive officer for the Kosovo Negotiation Team, said that the seven Kosovar negotiators had been chosen in September 2005 by the late President Ibrahim Rugova. He said that about 22 of the team’s 70 staff and working group members are women.

The Coalition could turn into a leading voice for inter-ethnic cooperation, particularly if Kosovo emerges with independence from the negotiations. Many feel that independence would cause a backlash from Serb nationalists, who are fiercely opposed to the dismembering of Serbia.

The Coalition’s approach has already drawn praise from conflict resolution specialists. “Women can have a tremendous impact on peace negotiations,” said Victoria Stanski, manager of network strategy and advocacy at The Initiative for Inclusive Security (formerly Women Waging Peace). “They bring an understanding of the root causes of the conflict and focus on practical issues related to quality of life and human security.”

Meanwhile, in an unrelated incident, KWN has criticized UN police in Kosovo for injuring 33 women who protested the unannounced visit of two former Serb residents to the village of Krusha e Vogel during a UN war crimes investigation on May 25. The UN responded by accusing the women of “attacking” the UN police and warning that Kosovars must respect the rule of law if their demand for independence is to be credible.

KWN is a partner of the Advocacy Project (AP). AP has sent a graduate from the American University in Washington, Barbra Bearden, to intern with KWN this summer.

- For more about the Peace Coalition, and copies of the May 26 bulletin, email <http://www.womensnetwork.org/?PageID=39>
- For the KWN’s open letter to the UN over the May 25 Krusha e Vogel incident visit [www.womensnetwork.org](http://www.womensnetwork.org)
- For Women in Black visit <http://womeninblack.org/en/about>

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