



**STATEMENT BY MS. MIROSLAVA BEHAM,
AMBASSADOR OF SERBIA,
ON CURRENT ISSUES
CONCERNING THE SITUATION OF THE VISOKI DEČANI
MONASTERY IN KOSOVO/ SERBIA,
AT THE 717th MEETING OF
THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

19 June 2008

Mr. Chairman,

As we pointed out in our earlier intervention today, the unilateral declaration of independence by the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government of Kosovo and Metohija on 17 February this year was an illegal act, and it remains so.

This act did not solve a problem, but created many new ones. All of them have their immediate impact on the situation on the ground, on the daily life of the people in Kosovo, in particular on that of the non-Albanian communities that do not accept the illegal independence of the Serbian province.

We continue to believe that the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, as a distinct component of UNMIK, can play an important role in contributing to the improvement of the extremely difficult living conditions of the non-Albanian population – provided that it remains status-neutral and strictly adheres to the provisions of resolution 1244. An ethnically well balanced staff structure, a truly unbiased approach, transparency and activities focused on the protection of human rights issues in the broadest sense are indispensable preconditions for the effectiveness of OMiK activities.

Mr. Chairman,

It is uncontested, even by those countries, who favor the independence of Kosovo, that the protection of the Serbian cultural and religious heritage in Kosovo and Metohija should be in the focus of the international community's efforts, including those of the OSCE, to relieve the worrying living conditions for non-Albanians, to restore safety and security, to eliminate discrimination and to establish the rule of law in Kosovo.

The case of the Visoki Dečani Monastery, unfortunately, tells us a different story. Visoki Dečani Monastery is a major Serbian Orthodox monastery from the 14th century, situated in the region of Metohija, 12 km south from the town of Peč. Its cathedral is the biggest medieval church in the Balkans which contains the largest preserved monument of Byzantine fresco-painting, and the monastery is listed on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

On 17 May 2008 the head of UNMIK, Mr. Joachim Rücker, after thorough investigations, signed an Executive Decision (2008/21) ordering the municipal cadastral office in Dečani to return the cadastral information for Visoki Dečani Monastery to its state in 1998, after the cadastral office had illegally relabeled 24 hectares of the monastery's land as socially-owned property of Albanian companies in 2001. The response of the Albanian run Dečani municipality to the monastery's request with respect to the cadastral records in the beginning of June was, that they do not recognize UNMIK and, hence, no executive decisions by UNMIK. The municipal assembly decided not to implement the executive decision and to cut all contacts with the only two UNMIK officials in this region, who had shown particular focus on the rights of non-Albanian communities and the Serbian monasteries. The OSCE Mission was informed about the whole situation.

Since the issuance of the Executive Decision, two serious physical attacks on the UNMIK staff members in Dečani occurred, the last one on 12 June. The day before yesterday a Municipal Leadership Forum on the protection of cultural heritage, organized by the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, took place without the participation of UNMIK representatives or representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church. At the meeting, the aforementioned restoration of the cadastral records was not addressed at all, instead, the Dečani Monastery brotherhood and the Serbian Orthodox Church were blamed for illegal acts and activities. The Dečani Monastery brethren qualified the OSCE-led meeting as "the most open example of public lynch". For them, who live in total isolation, this is an event that adds to their fears caused by all other incidents of intimidation that occur on a regular basis, including mortar attacks.

Mr. Chairman,

The situation of the Dečani Monastery stands exemplary for the situation of Serbs and other non-Albanians in Kosovo, in particular those living in the enclaves scattered throughout the province. We urgently call on the OSCE to exercise all its authority and to protect these people by protecting the human rights and the rule of law in Kosovo *effectively*.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman