

Pentecostals

ostracizing

The new democratic regime in Serbia is bringing no relief to the hard-pressed Pentecostal and evangelical churches in the country. A pending federal law on religion and a new model for religious education both favor the country's so-called historical religions, in particular the Orthodox Church.

Simultaneous smear campaigns in government television brand both Pentecostals and Baptists as “harmful cults.” Serbian believers have appealed to the international community for support. A number of churches have had their windows smashed by unknown aggressors, and in one town a mob threw stones and bottles at a bus bringing believers to a summer conference.

“People respond to the smear, but there is more to it than that,” said Viktor Sabo, missions director of the Serbian Pentecostal Movement. “When four churches get their windows smashed in the same night it is not spontaneous lynching but coordinated raiding.”

The pending bill distinguishes between “governmentally recognized” religions and others. Religions expected to be officially recognized are the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Hungarian-Reformed and Slovak-Lutheran churches, Islam and the Jewish Congregation. Before the law was drafted, the government already had invited these religious communities to start teaching religion in schools.

The Pentecostal Movement, the Baptist Union and the Evangelical Alliance have protested the mounting

discrimination. "We demand that the government protect our lives and property," Sabo said.

The proposed Serbian law is modeled after laws in Russia and Western Europe. Adolf Hitler established the legal distinction between "recognized" and "unrecognized" religions, and both Germany and Austria still enforce it.

Sabo attributes the present surge of discrimination to the weakness of the new Serbian government that last year took control after the fall of former Yugoslav President and alleged war criminal Slobodan Milosevic.

"The government feels it needs the support of the powerful Orthodox Church and has struck a deal," Sabo said.

-Tomas Dixon