

## ORTHODOX IN KOSOVO PROTEST DESTRUCTION OF CHURCHES

Feb. 7, 2000

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KOSOVO -- On January 15, 2000 the Serbian Orthodox Church of St Ilija the Prophet in the village of Cernica, near Gnjilane, in Kosovo was dynamited. This was the 77th Serbian Orthodox Church or monastery to be destroyed in Kosovo since the arrival of the NATO peacekeeping troops and the UN administration in June 1999.

Hieromonk Sava Janjic, a spokesman for the Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Kosovo and Metohija, told Keston News Service:

"The Serbian community and the Orthodox Church in Kosovo strongly condemn this latest barbaric act which confirms that the ultimate aim of the Albanian extremists is the destruction of all Orthodox and Christian churches, monasteries, cemeteries, and monuments in Kosovo and Metohija. It makes it even more tragic when we are aware that all of that happens in the presence of the strongest army in the world-- NATO, and the UN mission in Kosovo."

There are about 450 Serbs and 3,000 Albanians living in the village of Cernica today. Since their arrival last June, US Marines have been closely patrolling the Serbian houses and the church. They have positioned armored vehicles on the hill nearby. They have had a sentry post about 70 meters from the church, which is close to Serbian houses. Despite this, however, Serbs in Cernica have been attacked regularly.

According to information received from Father Sava, last year a shepherd was killed while at work in his fields, and hand grenades were thrown into a yard of another man. On another occasion, six mortar shells hit the part of the village where Serbs are living. On a third occasion, the house of a Serbian family was damaged in an explosion while the family was eating dinner; the wife died instantly and the husband spent hours digging his son from the rubble. The remaining Serbs are leaving the village, and it is certain that their houses will then be sacked, burned and destroyed, despite all the guards.

Investigation has shown that a large quantity of dynamite was placed inside the church building, close to the entrance door, or at the entrance door. The explosion occurred at 3:20 AM. The blast hit three neighboring Serbian houses (50 meters away) with rubble and caused severe damage to the roofs and facing walls. The front part of the church was completely destroyed, while the fire that started afterwards burned the altar and the frescoes.

The parish priest of Gnjilane, Father Trajkovic, made a public appeal to the US Marines, asking: "How is it possible for someone to destroy the church in front of their patrols and sentries, despite their modern night-vision equipment?" Later that day, a spokesman for the NATO peacekeeping force issued a statement "regretting" the bombing and similar acts of violence, and announcing that the peacekeeping force would station additional troops in the area of the latest explosion.

The Church of the St Ilija the Prophet was rebuilt in 1912 on the site where an earlier medieval church was destroyed. It was considered to be one of the "jewels of Serbian sacred architecture in Kosovo."