

SERBIA - KOSOVO: Arson Attack After Monastery Liturgy

Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 19 July 2002

Soon after Serbian Orthodox priests and monks left a ruined monastery in south western Kosovo where they had conducted the liturgy, two surviving monastery buildings were set on fire by unknown attackers. The 14 July liturgy at the site of the demolished Church of the Holy Unmercenaries Cosmas and Damian in the monastery at Zociste (Zozishte in Albanian), 5 kilometres (3 miles) south of Orahovac (Rahovec), had been the first held there in the three years since Yugoslav forces withdrew from Kosovo and the monastery was largely destroyed. In mid-May, the site was visited by senior Kosovo officials and international representatives (see KNS 31 May 2002), and was assigned for reconstruction as part of a wider internationally-supported plan to create conditions for the return of expelled Serbs to the area. "Starting a fire in the monastery was a clear message from the local population," claimed Fr Sava (Janjic), a leading Serbian Orthodox monk in Kosovo, in a statement to Keston News Service on 15 July.

The service at Zociste - attended by some 200 local Serbs brought in under escort from the NATO-led peacekeeping force KFOR - was held after Bishop Artemije (Radosavljevic) informed KFOR's Multinational Brigade South that a liturgy would be held at the monastery, a statement from the Serbian Orthodox Raska and Prizren Diocese reported. The service was part of a wider project of visitation and consecration of damaged churches and monasteries in Kosovo during the summer months by monks and priests of the diocese. This project was drawn up after the Kosovo parliament adopted a resolution on freedom of movement for all citizens.

One fire was started under a summer house and another at the place where the refectory used to stand. A KFOR patrol spotted it and informed Fr Peter Ulemek, the parish priest in Velika Hoca (Hoce e Madhe). Local Serbs then organised a fire brigade and went to tackle the fire under the protection of United Nations (UNMIK) police. It is reported that the damage is not great, since the buildings were already heavily damaged in 1999 when monks fled the monastery. Since the incident Turkish KFOR troops have been protecting the site.

Bishop Artemije had already complained of the abusive behaviour of local Albanians while the liturgy was underway. It proceeded against a background of cursing and shouting, with various items being thrown at the priests. Fr Ulemek was hit on the head by a stone, and another person was slightly injured. "The Albanian extremists have shown their true face after rampaging on the surrounding hills during the entire liturgy," Bishop Artemije told the Belgrade-based paper Danas on 16 July, "in front of the world."

The disruption to the liturgy and the subsequent arson attack were condemned as "very disturbing" by Susan Manuel, spokeswoman for UNMIK. "We understand the situation was confusing, but what remains a fact is that fires were set there, following the visit of the Serb clergy, at a sacred site, in an area where strenuous efforts have been made to begin some kind of tolerance," she declared on 16 July. She noted that local Albanians were reported to have thrown stones and shoes at the priests during

the service. She said it was "extremely disheartening" that "some people persist in exploiting fears that remain within the population and fuelling hatred".

The diocese reported on 17 July that when Fr Ulemek managed to return to the monastery earlier that day escorted by UNMIK policemen and two military policemen but without a KFOR escort, he began to film the fire damage. "As soon as he saw this a Turkish [KFOR] officer approached Fr Peter and told him that he is not allowed to shoot in the monastery 'without permission'. He ordered Fr Peter to delete the video tape immediately."

Although attempts are underway to improve security and the freedom of movement in Kosovo, including more conciliatory recent statements from senior Albanian officials, church officials say this approach has not been repeated at a local level. "The local Albanian population and their leadership use every opportunity to make very clear that Serbs are not wanted back in Kosovo and Metohija", a diocesan statement claimed.

The monastery of Saints Cosmas and Damian in Zociste was founded in the 14th century, but was closed for many centuries. A brotherhood of seven monks lived there until the NATO intervention in 1999. After KFOR troops were deployed in Kosovo, the monastery was looted, desecrated and torched, and the old church building was levelled to the ground.

Bishop Artemije complained on 17 July that he had just received a letter from the German commander of the Multinational Brigade South, Brigadier General Wolf-Dieter Skodowski, informing him that KFOR would not provide security for the reconstruction of the Zociste monastery and that the Church would have to take upon itself responsibility "if something happens". "Furthermore General Skodowski indirectly threatened the Bishop that he may suspend protection of other Orthodox Christian sites in the area of his responsibility," the bishop declared. "This letter of General Skodowski has finally made clear that KFOR is not willing to grant protection for reconstruction of an Orthodox monastery which was destroyed by UCK/KLA extremists in their very presence. The true reason for such a position is that KFOR does not want to risk a conflict with Albanian extremists who have still not been disarmed." Bishop Artemije pointed out that almost twenty Serbian Orthodox churches have been destroyed in southern Kosovo since the deployment of German forces and no perpetrators have been arrested so far.