

## KOSOVO: CONTINUED DESTRUCTION OF ORTHODOX GRAVEYARDS

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 21 February 2001

Orthodox graveyards in Kosovo have suffered sustained attacks by extremist Albanians (see KNS 11 September 2000), which international peacekeepers seem powerless to prevent despite complex arrangements for protection of believers visiting the cemeteries.

‘Our request to visit the Serbian Orthodox graveyard in Musnikovo village, in Sredacka Zupa in Kosovo, on 17 February, the Serbian Orthodox All Souls' Day, was rejected by the German KFOR general, with the explanation that this day is reserved for the local Albanians to have their recreation day. The general advised us to alter our All Souls' Day!’ Momcilo Ilic, president of the Board for Human Rights in Brezovica told Keston News Service by telephone on 14 February. ‘The representative of the OSCE office in Prizren also told us to change the date of our religious holiday. We cannot visit our family graves when our faith says so, but we have to ask a German general!’

To demonstrate the extent of the destruction to cemeteries, Orthodox priests Father Zivojin Kojic and Father Radivoje Panic and Gordana Subaric-Georgijeva presented a documentary video - Kosovski Rekvijem (Kosovo Requiem) - at a 15 February presentation organised by the Belgrade office of the Serbian Orthodox Church Diocese of Raska and Prizren. The audience in the Belgrade Youth Hall saw 40 minutes of video footage of destroyed and damaged tombstones, dug out and emptied graves, burned chapels and obscenities written on the gates of five Kosovo cemeteries.

‘This material is only a fraction of what we have recorded as a testimony of how people are living and dying in Kosovo today, after the war and after the NATO destruction. It was done mainly with an amateur camera and with the understanding of some KFOR officers and UNMIK police inspectors, for which we are thankful,’ Fr Kojic, a parish priest in Urosevac, told Keston. ‘The situation is terrible. In order to visit a graveyard, we have to give seven days notice so that KFOR and UNMIK can investigate if there are any mines or unexploded bombs, then we visit the graveyard under police protection. For Prizren, Pec and Urosevac KFOR will not approve any visit or give us protection.’

The way the graveyards have been destroyed shows, according to Father Panic, that it is part of the systematic eradication of Serbian monuments, churches, graveyards and monasteries from Kosovo, which KFOR is powerless to stop. ‘It is frightening even to think about it,’ he said. ‘For example, someone has exhumed three bodies from the graveyard in Urosevac; no one knows where they are, and the local priest or the local Serbian population have not been informed about it. One day we went there and there were only holes in the ground, no casket, no bodies, nothing.’

‘In Djakovica we were not allowed to make a video recording of the local graveyard, the Italian KFOR commander was not willing to let us do it. We think that KFOR is trying to avoid organised visitations because they are afraid of the findings. We were also forbidden to enter the graveyard in Potkalija near Prizren by the local KFOR. During our

visitation to the Pristina Orthodox cemetery we were only allowed to be there for 11 minutes! KFOR and UNMIK police respond that they are trying to protect the living and cemeteries are left alone.'

'When an Orthodox dies in Kosovo, we perform burials under KFOR surveillance,' added Fr. Kojic. 'We have only two hours to do it. If I have two burial services to perform in one day, I can do only one and at the other place a deceased is buried without a proper service, because KFOR does not want to spend too much time or personnel on it. When the procession starts from the house of the deceased, KFOR tanks and UNMIK police vehicles go at the head and the rear. During the ceremony in the cemetery, UNMIK stops the local traffic and creates even greater disturbance.'

'Despite all the problems we met some wonderful people in KFOR and UNMIK who helped us make a video record of the tragic situation in Kosovo,' Subaric-Georgijeva told Keston. 'All we can do is to present it. Unfortunately, we still cannot afford to translate and sub-title it, to show to interested people abroad,' 'In the months to come we will present more video documentaries with our findings from Kosovo. The world must see what is truly going on there.' (END)