

KOSOVO: ARE ORTHODOX SITES SUFFICIENTLY GUARDED?

by Geraldine Fagan and Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 27 November 2001

According to the Serbian Orthodox Church, Albanian extremists have destroyed or vandalised 108 churches in Kosovo since the arrival of NATO forces in mid-June 1999, most recently in Staro Gracko (Gracke e Vjeter in Albanian) (see KNS 12 November 2001). To date, the international Kosovo Force (KFOR) has been guarding such sites. On 26 October, however, Fr Sava (Janjic), assistant to Abbot Teodosije of Decani Monastery, told Keston News Service of his fear that monasteries such as his will be put at risk following the province's 17 November elections: "Some former KLA [Kosovo Liberation Army] man will decide its future."

In the latest edition of "Crucified Kosovo," a book published by the Raska and Prizren diocese documenting these developments, it is alleged that destruction of Orthodox sites is continuing in eight phases. These are: 1) shattering due to NATO action between 23 March and 11 June 1999, 2) looting after 13 June 1999, 3) desecration, 4) burning, 5) initial blasting with explosives, 6) blasting of surviving parts, 7) removal of building materials, and 8) clearance of terrain.

Church representatives thus believe that the attacks are part of a systematic campaign to eradicate Serb Orthodox presence in the province, rather than acts of blind revenge. In the Kosovar Albanians' struggle for a separate state, according to Fr Sava, "the Serbian Orthodox Church is the last anchor of Serbian presence here, so we are strategically dangerous to them." In one of only two mixed Serb/Albanian villages, Osojane (Osojan), near Istok (Istog), for example, the Church of St Nicholas (built in 1986) was "dynamited in a professional way" after the arrival of NATO forces, Sister Mikhaela of Pec-Patriarchate Convent told Keston on 25 October. Since the most important structural parts had been targeted, she explained, parishioners are forbidden to enter the building: "It will have to be torn down."

Keston was unable to find separate confirmation of progressive stages of systematic destruction specifically of church property, but on 24 October in Belgrade the programme co-ordinator of the United Methodist Committee on Relief, Mary Mayall, outlined a similar process occurring to civilian properties if it became known that Serbs might return to them, which, she said, local Albanians put down to "deterioration." She cited an example in Ljestar (Leshtar), near Strezovce (Strezofc), the second mixed Serb/Albanian village in Kosovo. "We assigned mostly complete houses to the 'to-be-rebuilt' category," Mayall told Keston. "When we returned a few weeks later there were whole walls missing - that's not deterioration."

Bob Charmbury, United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) deputy head of Pec (Peja) regional administration, said that he was unaware of any destruction of religious sites since KFOR's arrival in the province: "It was all in the immediate aftermath of the war," he told Keston on 26 October. Asked specifically about Osojane, he said that there was no church there, "and I doubt one will be built. It is more important to get houses built."

Charmbury maintained that all Orthodox churches "except those already destroyed" were under individual KFOR guard, including those not in use if located in an Albanian area. If they were in a Serb enclave, he added, they would not be guarded separately. On 25 October one of KFOR's two main spokesmen, British Ministry of Defence employee Tim Zillessen,

told Keston in Pristina that KFOR is currently providing protection for 140 religious sites 24 hours a day.

In the village of Gracanica (Ulpiana) - which is a Serb enclave - Keston indeed observed only a single Swedish KFOR officer outside the gates of Gracanica Monastery, while the roads into the village are controlled by substantial military checkpoints. Keston also saw that both Pec Patriarchate Convent and Decani Monastery have individual checkpoints at the beginning of the track leading to their entrances, which, in Decani's case, is guarded by some ten Italian tanks. The ruins of the Church of the Holy Trinity (built in 1992) by the side of the Pec-Pristina road, by contrast, are entirely deserted.

While Keston encountered high praise among church representatives for the Italian KFOR - who, according to Fr Sava, are providing "not just physical security but assistance everywhere where it is missing" - Mirjana Menkovic of the Mnemosyne Centre for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in Kosovo pointed out to Keston in Belgrade on 24 October that destruction was continuing because the international authorities administering Kosovo had given "no signal to the Albanian community that it is unacceptable."

According to Charmbury, it is indeed unlikely that anyone will be prosecuted for the destruction: "You wouldn't find them - impossible." Despite the allegations of continued destruction, Zillessen did not think it likely that KFOR protection of religious sites would be altered in any way. He maintained that there were no plans to hand this responsibility over to the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC), which, a recent UNMIK report acknowledges, has seen the recruitment of 5,000 former KLA members: "I can see an instant problem with KPC being asked to guard an Orthodox church, for instance." Charmbury also did not see such a transition "happening immediately," and acknowledged that KFOR protection could continue "for years, I suppose." (END)