

KOSOVO: SPATE OF ATTACKS MARRED ORTHODOX EASTER

by Branko Bjelajac and Felix Corley, Keston News Service, 31 May 2002

Despite recent signs that the Kosovo government has been working to try to bring reconciliation with the Serbian Orthodox community (see separate KNS article), attacks continued over the Orthodox Easter season. "Any attacks on any religious groups are deplorable," Sunil Narula, spokesman for the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), told Keston News Service from Pristina on 31 May. "KFOR and UNMIK are in the forefront of protecting Orthodox religious sites. The situation has got better recently, but such attacks have not completely stopped." However, Ramadan Audiu, the chief advisor to Kosovo's prime minister, denied to Keston that any such attacks had taken place. "No attacks have taken place on any Orthodox sites or personnel," he declared on 31 May. "Since 1 January of this year to today there have been no attacks at all on the Serbian minority, except for incidents started by the Serbs in the northern half of Mitrovica." He labelled Orthodox accounts of attacks in May as "disinformation and propaganda".

The Serbian Orthodox Church and the Yugoslav government have stepped up diplomatic measures to alert the international community to continuing destruction and desecration of Orthodox sites in Kosovo. Many prominent Orthodox sites have remained under the protection of the international KFOR peacekeeping force since the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo in 1999. Despite this protection, more than a hundred churches have been damaged or destroyed, and many graveyards desecrated.

On 3 May (Good Friday) the monastery of the Patriarchate in Pec (Peja in Albanian) was stoned, targeting the nuns who live there, the information service of the Raska and Prizren Diocese reported. "The Albanian youth again used the narrow road that runs close to the north walls," the diocese told Keston on 5 May. "Using many insults they sprayed the monastery yard with stones, also hitting the ancient churches. In order to prevent these provocations in the future, the Italian KFOR soldiers decided to build an additional wall to the existing one with sandbags and barbed wire." The nuns in this monastery are the only remaining Serbs living in the town.

In the early hours of 5 May, unknown persons toppled all the tombstones at the Piskote Orthodox cemetery near the city of Djakovica (Gjakova), as local Serbs reported the following morning. "Marble tablets were stolen from several graves, probably to be resold, and crosses and inscriptions were broken," the diocese told Keston. "Part of the roof from the local chapel of St. Lazar's has been taken as well. This attack occurred only after the Italian troops recently decided to withdraw their troops from the chapel entrance yard." The Belgrade-based Beta news agency reported on 5 May that KFOR representatives in Pristina confirmed that "certain changes" had occurred, but stressed that it was not clear whether these incidents were recent or from an earlier period. KFOR announced that UNMIK will carry out an investigation. However, the diocese gave Keston a different account. "Official KFOR representatives did not inform the representatives of the Serbian community and the Church about this act of vandalism. We were able to confirm the information only through mediators via a local KFOR unit."

On Easter Sunday, a group of Decani monks visited the Orthodox graveyard in the town of Decani, and reported that several of the graves had recently been damaged and that soil had been dug out from around some of them. The brotherhood of the Monastery has asked the KFOR unit situated only several dozen metres (yards) from the graveyard to protect it more effectively. "I think that the destruction of graveyards is part of a strategy to prevent Serbs from returning to Kosovo and Metohija," Fr Sava (Janjic), deputy to the abbot Teodosije, told Keston on 16 May. "These horrible acts of uncivilised behaviour represent a specific way of negating not only our human but also our religious rights."

The Diocesan letter further reported some minor incidents – verbal provocations to the nuns in Devic and preventing a village procession in Suvo Grlo near Istok - that occurred during the Easter holiday period. Another car was stoned on 3 May in the town of Lipljan, when one family attempted to approach the local church for the Good Friday service.

Late in the evening of 6 May, a group of Albanians stopped and stoned two vehicles entering Kosovo at Kulina Pass with nuns from Pec Patriarchate and monks from Decani monastery, who were waiting for Italian KFOR troops to arrive to escort them to the safety of their respective monasteries. Only minor damage was reported but the Raska and Prizren Diocese strongly condemned this "open act of hostility".

Even after Easter, attacks continued. During the night of 16/17 May, 25 tombstones were demolished at the Serbian Orthodox graveyard of Ajvalija near Gracanica, a village where no Serbs remain.

In attempt to alert the international religious community to the continuing destruction of Serbian Orthodox religious sites in Kosovo, state and Church officials informed about this issue several senior church guests visiting Yugoslavia in May, including Petros VII, Patriarch of Alexandria and Pope of all Africa, British-based Greek Orthodox bishop and Oxford University lecturer Kallistos Ware (who was presented with an honorary doctorate at Belgrade's Serbian Orthodox Faculty), as well as with the Anglican Bishop of London, Richard Chartres.

After meeting the Yugoslav president Vojislav Kostunica on 15 May, Catholic Cardinal Walter Kasper – who was visiting on behalf of Vatican – told a Belgrade press conference: "We are sorry that many cultural monuments have been destroyed, especially in Kosovo, because it is the cultural heritage of all Europe, and we hope that this country will be able to restore them." A presidential statement distributed by the state news agency Tanjug on 15 May said: "In discussion a concern has been raised because...in Kosovo...there is a continuance of destruction of rich religious and cultural inheritance which is of enormous value to the world cultural and religious heritage." (END)