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KOSOVO: Further attacks on Orthodox sites

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

An Orthodox church in Pristina attacked in May was again stoned late on 26 June, while tombstones in an Orthodox graveyard in Kosovska Vitina have been destroyed. "This latest wave of attacks is further proof that Albanian extremists are using all means to intimidate and throw out of Kosovo the remaining Serbian population, while the international community is doing little to prevent it," Fr Sava (Janjic), deputy abbot of the Decani Monastery, told Forum 18 News Service. After the May attack on St Nicholas' Church, KFOR spokesman Garry Bannister-Green told Forum 18 that "KFOR deplores all such acts of mindless vandalism". He denied that removing the KFOR guard had threatened the church's security.

In the latest attacks on Serbian Orthodox sites in Kosovo, a church in the capital Pristina that had been attacked in May was again stoned late on 26 June. The NATO-led peacekeeping force KFOR withdrew its protection from St Nicholas' Church at the end of last year (see F18News 13 May 2003). Meanwhile, Fr Dragan Kojic from Kosovska Vitina reported on 29 June that fifteen more tombstones have been destroyed in the village's Orthodox graveyard.

"This latest wave of attacks is further proof that Albanian extremists are using all means to intimidate and throw out of Kosovo the remaining Serbian population, while the international community is doing little to prevent it," Fr Sava (Janjic), deputy abbot of the Decani Monastery, told Forum 18 News Service from the monastery on 30 June.

These latest attacks came a month after two other incidents. On 28 May unknown attackers fired at Spanish KFOR sentries guarding the Orthodox convent of Gorioc, near Istok, while on 31 May a hand grenade was thrown at the Greek KFOR checkpoint protecting the St Czar Uros Church in the town of Urosevac (Ferizaj in Albanian) in southern Kosovo. Five people were injured.

The United Nations mission UNMIK (which is in charge of policing duties) and KFOR are searching for the perpetrators of all these recent incidents, but in the last three years not a single person has been arrested and brought to justice in connection with hundreds of similar attacks on Orthodox churches or graveyards.

After the May attack on St Nicholas' Church, KFOR spokesman Squadron Leader Garry Bannister-Green told Forum 18 from Pristina that "KFOR deplores all such acts of mindless vandalism". He insisted that there is a comprehensive review process before "patrimonial sites" are handed over from KFOR to UNMIK protection. "Only when the correct conditions have been met will this process proceed. These conditions were met when St Nicholas' church was handed over in November 2002."

Bannister-Green denied that withdrawing fixed posts from outside Orthodox sites (known in the jargon as "unfixing") reduced their security. "After such individual attacks we undertake an investigation, in conjunction with UNMIK police, and review the situation based on the facts and make a new assessment on the appropriate course of action to take," he told Forum 18. "The unfixing strategy does not leave a vacuum in security. The security situation in Kosovo is complex and is dependent upon more than just fixed guards. We have confidence in UNMIK police and the Kosovo Police Service in their work." He said KFOR is currently protecting 26 patrimonial sites.

"I spoke with Fr Kojic by short-wave radio yesterday," Fr Sava told Forum18, "and he is in a desperate situation. One of his parishioners, while visiting family graves on 27 June, noticed that many tombstones had been thrown to the ground and smashed or broken." The parishioner told Fr Kojic, who alerted the local UNMIK representative, who went with the priest to the site. "The only thing they could do is to identify the damage," Fr Sava added. "The UNMIK representative offered some help in building a new fence, but no other means of protection."

Fr Sava reported that according to Fr Kojic, the situation in Kosovska Vitina – home to 150 Serbian families - has not improved, while in many ways it is worse. "Several families have already announced that they will move out to Serbia because of the constant threats and intimidations by the local Albanian extremists. The situation is no better in any Serbian-populated village or town in Kosovo."

During the stoning of the Orthodox Church in Pristina shortly after 9pm on 26 June, some damage was done to the entrance door of the church, while several windows were broken at the parish home where Fr Miroslav Popadic lives with his family. This incident occurred on the same day that, during a visit to Pristina, NATO secretary-general George Robertson appealed to Kosovo Albanians to show more tolerance and readiness to build a multiethnic society.

The Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Raska and Prizren, again strongly condemned the latest attack and requested UNMIK police to arrest the perpetrators.

On 31 May, at 9.45 pm, unknown attackers threw a hand grenade at a Greek KFOR checkpoint in the centre of Urosevac which also guards the Church of St. Czar Uros, built in 1933. Five people were injured, including one of the Greek soldiers, UNMIK police reported in a 2 June statement. The following day the municipal council president Adem Salihaj, expressed his concern over the attack.

On 28 May, UNMIK police also reported an attack on Spanish KFOR soldiers, when a vehicle stopped in the vicinity of the Gorioc Monastery, near Istok, around midnight, two people got out and started to shoot toward the soldiers. When one of the Spanish soldiers returned fire, the attackers ran into their vehicle and quickly fled from the scene. The monastery, founded in the 14th century, was rebuilt in the second half of the twentieth century. It is today served by seven nuns and an 85-year-old monk. Nuns are not able to leave the monastery without a military escort.

"The situation is rather grim," says Fr Sava, "Albanian extremists want all the Serbs out of the province, and the international community does not have the means to stop it from happening. To us, the Church, this is a clear strategy. To the international community serving in Kosovo this is another reason to withhold information and hide the truth." He complained that international bodies speak of the eventual return of Serbian refugees, "but in truth we have not seen any significant number of Serbs returning to 'peaceful' Kosovo". He said some Serbs have come back, but only to check their possessions and leave again after a month or two because there are no jobs. "Where there are no atrocities, economic reasons are pushing the Serbian population to withdraw."

Forum 18 was unable to reach Fr Kojic as the telephone line has been disconnected and an automated message reports that the line is out of order. Forum 18 was told that on 30 June he left for Gracanica Monastery, the diocesan seat, to visit Bishop Artemije and report on the latest incident in his parish.

"Kosovo and Metohija is a unique postwar area in which four years after the conflict the restoration of Christian holy sites is impossible due to the prevailing intolerance of the Albanian Muslim majority," the diocese declared on 11 June in a sweeping critique of the situation four years after the international community took charge of Kosovo. "While at the same time dozens of new mosques have been built, many of them with ample funding from Arab states, Orthodox Christianity remains under persecution: nuns are stoned and verbally abused, priests cannot normally visit their flock, parish churches are stoned, the theological school in Prizren - which worked even in the times of the Ottoman Empire - is closed without any hope of reopening, cemeteries are being systematically desecrated, crosses are broken and holy icons burnt."

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