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MACEDONIA: Who attacked, armed with machine guns, an Orthodox monastery?

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

Metropolitan Jovan (Vranisskovski) of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia, has accused Macedonian state officials of attacking a monastery loyal to his archdiocese. The "infamous Lions, a paramilitary state security unit, which was established in FYR Macedonia under supervision of former Milosevic paramilitary instructors", has been accused of responsibility by the Kosovo diocese. During the attack, five masked men armed with machine guns men broke in, smashed most of the religious items, stole a dozen icons, poured petrol on the furniture and set it alight. They also attacked two nuns, Renata Mizhimakovska and Dana Stojanovska, cutting their hair. The perpetrators escaped into the dark. The attack follows numerous legal cases brought by the Macedonian authorities in recent months against clergy and nuns of the church, including an accusation that Metropolitan Jovan is a spy of a foreign state. Metropolitan Jovan denies all the accusations.

Metropolitan Jovan (Vranisskovski), leader of the Ohrid Archdiocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia, has accused state officials of organising the 20 February attack on a monastery loyal to his archdiocese and based in a remote, private house. "Somebody from them did it, if you ask me," he told Forum 18 News Service from the southern Macedonian town of Bitola on 23 February. "Who else would dare to walk 200 metres on a snowy, dark mountain slope, armed with automatic guns? Where does their courage come from? Were and are they not afraid that the nuns would report them or that they may've been seen by others in the neighbourhood?"

The Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate issued a strongly-worded condemnation in the Serbian capital Belgrade. "It is almost certain that the real target of the attackers was not only the monastery building, the nuns and church vessels," it declared in a 21 February statement, "but apparently the intent was to carry out the physical liquidation of all the canonical bishops in this region." The Serbian Orthodox Church questioned what use anyone would have for "stolen church items and liturgical books".

The Serbian Orthodox diocese in Kosovo went further, accusing the Macedonian authorities and the Macedonian Orthodox Church of engaging the "infamous Lions, a paramilitary state security unit, which was established in FYR Macedonia under supervision of former Milosevic paramilitary instructors", which was officially disbanded last April.

However, Mirjana Konteska, spokesperson for the Interior Ministry, said such claims of state involvement in the attack were "speculation" on the part of the Serbian Orthodox Church. "There is no proof that any members of the ex-Lions were involved and I can't speculate on that," she told Forum 18 from the capital Skopje on 24 February. "The investigators and the courts will determine the accuracy of the reports." She said the Interior Ministry would announce the results of the investigation "after a few days".

The weekend house on a hilltop in the village of Nizepolje ten kilometres (six miles) from Bitola, which was attacked in the evening of 20 February, has housed the Serbian Orthodox monastery of St John Chrysostom since 2002. Five masked armed men broke in, smashed most of the religious items, stole a dozen icons, poured petrol on the furniture and set it alight and cut the hair of two nuns, Renata Mizhimakovska and Dana Stojanovska. The nuns were later released, while the perpetrators escaped into the dark.

Metropolitan Jovan told Forum 18 that on the day of the attack he and his fellow bishops Marko and Jovan had been holding a synodal meeting at the house, together with the synod secretary, Father Superior David. "We have to hold synodal meetings in extraordinary conditions. We meet in this adopted weekend house because the Macedonian state and executive power (government) attacks us, as does the so-called Macedonian Orthodox Church."

He said that after 4 pm Bishops Marko and Joakim left for Skopje, while he and Father Superior David left at about 6 pm, when it was already dark. Only 15 minutes after reaching Bitola, Metropolitan Jovan received emergency calls from both nuns. "Strangely, my phone was not working properly only at the time of the attack - after some time, it was all right," he told Forum 18. "The nuns ran in different directions. One of them stopped a car and called me from a mobile phone. The other reached the village and called from a neighbour. They told us that five armed men had entered the house, that they are destroying property, set fire, and desecrated them by cutting their hair."

Metropolitan Jovan went back immediately and found that the fire had burnt out inside the house. "It was a miracle from God that the house did not burn to the ground." He said damage came to at least 15,000 Euros (131,670 Norwegian kroner or 18,860 US dollars). "It was a terrible scene."

The next day, the police and a local investigative judge made a reconstruction of the attack, attended also by officers from Proxima, a European Union (EU) mission to observe, mentor and advise the Macedonian police to help bring it up to European standards, though with no executive power.

"I can confirm that two Proxima officers visited the site and were at the reconstruction of the incident," EU spokesperson Sheena Thomson told Forum 18 from Skopje. "We observed no breach of EU standards and the conduct of the police officers was quite adequate. The only remark is that some documents in Macedonian were seized at the scene, but this is accepted under local law, and we will continue to monitor their use in the continuation of the investigation. So far there were no other investigative activities." Bitola police are protecting the house, while the incident is still under investigation.

Numerous legal cases have been launched in recent months against clergy and nuns of the church (see for example F18News 28 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=238).

In the wake of a baptism service last summer and unity liturgy with the monks and nuns who left the Macedonian for the Serbian jurisdiction last month, two legal cases against Metropolitan Jovan are continuing. Two more have been announced: one that he is a spy of a foreign state, and another that, during his reign as Macedonian bishop of Veles before he joined the Serbian Church, he misused one million Denars. Metropolitan Jovan denies all the accusations

"I have not received the two last charges yet," Metropolitan Jovan told Forum 18. "But this is very symptomatic of the state of religious freedom in Macedonia: firstly the state (parliament) denies our rights. Then the executive power (police) arrests us and bans our services, questions us as if we are the criminals. And now the judicial system is producing a mass of accusations and allegations." He said all he and his followers can do is to sue the Macedonian state for what it claims are violations of its rights under Article 9 (1) of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which guarantees free religious practice.

The local MIA agency reported on 9 February that the Interior Ministry pressed robbery charges against monks who joined the Serbian Church in January. They are accused of taking five liturgical books and two seals valued at 150,000 Denars (21,577 Norwegian kroner, 2,458 Euros or 3,090 US dollars).

Earlier this month, the Greek Orthodox Synod issued a strong protest over the refusal of the Macedonian border police at the Bogorodica border crossing to allow two Greek priests to enter Macedonia. The two planned to meet clergy of the Ohrid Archdiocese.

The Serbian and Macedonian Orthodox Churches have been in dispute since 1967, when the Macedonian Church unilaterally declared its independence from the Serbian Church. The Macedonian Church's independence has not been recognised by any canonical Orthodox jurisdiction.

After several attempts to resolve the schism, the Serbian Orthodox Church established the Ohrid Archbishopric in Macedonia in 2002, and ordained former Macedonian Bishop Jovan to be Metropolitan of the diocese and a patriarchal representative. In late 2003 two more bishops were consecrated, Marko and Joakim. In early 2004, about 30 monks and nuns in Macedonia left the Macedonian Church and joined the Serbian Orthodox.

Despite the tensions, Metropolitan Jovan maintains that his Church's religious life is normal. "We have regular liturgies in Bitola, where people are attending the services. Unfortunately, only 60-70 people can enter my father's apartment, which we adapted into a chapel," he reported.

He said his Church is planning to press charges against the Macedonian state because of parliament's 23 January declaration of support for the Macedonian Orthodox Church. "Within the first two sentences, our religious and human rights are wiped out. They do not recognise our very existence," Metropolitan Jovan told Forum 18. "The state is permitting neither Greek nor Bulgarian Orthodox clerics to enter Macedonia for fear that the people will see with whom they have canonical unity."

But Konteska denies that the Macedonian authorities have anything against the Serbian Church's adherents in Macedonia. "They can practice their faith freely," she told Forum 18, "but not to have private churches in their homes and disturbing people of other faith by singing and making noise." She said the Interior Ministry is not interested in internal church matters "but only in people who break the law". She pointed out that Metropolitan Jovan is facing numerous criminal charges, but rejected suggestions that such charges were motivated by any official hostility to the Serbian Church. "We don't punish him for his faith, but for breaking the law."

Konteska also denied that the authorities prevented foreign Orthodox priests from visiting Macedonia. "But no foreign priest can

come in wearing priestly vestments and serve in a church unless they have an official invitation from a religious community – it's the same for Catholic priests or Muslim imams." She said the Ohrid Archdiocese is free to invite foreign clergy.

A printer-friendly map of Macedonia is available from

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=macedo>

Note that the formally recognized name of Macedonia in international law is "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia".

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