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KOSOVO & SERBIA: Pristina Orthodox priest "lucky" to be alive

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

The parish priest of the St Nicholas' Church in Kosovo's capital Pristina has told Forum 18 News Service that he is lucky to be alive after an Albanian mob burnt his church down yesterday evening, and set his parish house on fire just before dawn this morning. "I was lucky they did not look in the cellar otherwise God knows if this morning I would still be alive," he told Forum 18. St Nicholas' church, has long been under threat, especially since KFOR's guard force was removed last May. Since 1999, no attackers on this or any other Orthodox Church have been arrested by UNMIK, KFOR, or the mainly ethnically Albanian Kosovo Protection Service. At least 31 people have been killed so far, and about 17 churches and other Serbian Orthodox sites destroyed in the anti-Serb violence that began on 17 March and is still continuing (see F18News 18 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=280). Some Albanian politicians have, along with the Visoki Decani Orthodox Monastery, tried to stop the violence, which the international ombudsperson, Marek Antoni Nowicki described as "the intent to cleanse this land from the presence of all Serbs, in total rejection of the idea of a multi-ethnic cohabitation in Kosovo". An Orthodox Church in neighbouring Bosnia was also set on fire late yesterday (18 March).

The parish priest of the Church of St Nicholas in Kosovo's capital Pristina has told Forum 18 News Service he is lucky to be alive after his church was set on fire by an Albanian mob yesterday evening (18 March) and the parish house where he was hiding was set on fire when the mob returned just before dawn this morning. "I went to the cellar and hid," Fr Miroslav Popadic told Forum 18 News Service in tears from Pristina on 19 March. "They entered the church yard, spread petrol or diesel around and set it alight. I was lucky they did not look in the cellar otherwise God knows if this morning I would still be alive."

Some seventeen churches and other Serbian Orthodox sites have been attacked and burnt in Kosovo in the anti-Serb violence that began on 17 March (see F18News 18 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=280). At least 31 people have now been killed with hundreds wounded as Nato has rushed extra troops to the United Nations-administered Kosovo to reinforce the 18,500-strong international KFOR peace keeping force as it struggles to cope with the violence.

The situation of St Nicholas' church, along with other Orthodox shrines in Kosovo has caused the Orthodox Church deep concern for a long time, with an immediate increase in attacks on St Nicholas' after KFOR removed its guard force last May (see F18News 13 May 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=54). As with all the other attacks on Orthodox shrines since 1999, neither UNMIK, nor KFOR, nor the mainly ethnically Albanian Kosovo Protection Service have arrested any attackers.

Fr Popadic said the mob arrived about 8.30 pm yesterday to attack the nineteenth century St Nicholas' Church, destroying and desecrating it before setting it on fire. When the mob returned almost at dawn, he escaped by hiding in the cellar of the parish house. Before leaving, the mob set his house on fire. KFOR troops entered the church yard soon after and evacuated Fr Popadic in an armoured car to the safety of their nearby base.

He said KFOR had put all the more than 300 Serbs from Pristina and the nearby town of Obilic in the vicinity of the city's old military barracks, where they are protected by Norwegian troops. "There are pregnant women and two babies 2-3 weeks old," he told Forum 18. "We have no beds and the food is detestable. We were freezing last night. People are desperate and some of them are planning to leave for Serbia on foot. We have no life here anymore."

Another priest described the situation on 17 March as being "like a state of war". "It was an armed clash, houses were burned, and people were wounded and killed," Fr Nektarije, serving in the KIM Radio station, a local Serbian and Orthodox radio station in Gracanica area near Pristina, told Forum 18 on 19 March. "We had to evacuate women and children to Laplje selo, inside Serbian territory."

On 18 March, Albanian mobs destroyed three more Serbian Orthodox churches: in Donja Slapasnica, near Kamenica; in the village of Brnjak, near Bela Crkva and Orahovac; and the church of St Sava in the southern, Albanian-populated part of the divided city of Mitrovica.

Some Albanian elected politicians have tried to calm the violence. The Decani monastery brotherhood reported on 18 March that the mayor of Decani, Ibrahim Selmonaj of the Alliance for the Future of Kosova (AAK), phoned Fr Sava Janjic, the deputy abbot of the

Visoki Decani Monastery, to inform him that the leadership of Decani municipality and the AAK, the most influential party in the area, were making all possible efforts to prevent the escalation of violence and damage to the monastery. Fr Sava thanked Selmonaj for his political leadership and responsibility.

Decani monastery also appealed to all political leaders to refrain from issuing emotional statements and to return to moderation and diplomacy to defuse the tensions. The monastery particularly appealed to the media to help the process of reconciliation and stopping the violence.

Zivojin Rakocevic, editor in chief of KIM Radio in Gracanica, believes the violence was organised by Albanian "tribal structures" which had never been brought under official control, whether under Ottoman rule, during the Yugoslav kingdom or under Communist rule. "Their teams of executors roam around and level everything that is not theirs, whatever does not belong to their nation. This is Albanian nationalism, and religion and faith does not have a part in this," he told Forum 18 on 19 March. "The international community today in Kosovo also does not control this irrational sentiment."

Marek Antoni Nowicki, the international community's ombudsperson in Kosovo, said yesterday (18 March) that "The recent developments have, however, suggested that not all members of the Albanian community in Kosovo really want this prosperous future. Instead, the current pictures of horrible violence and heinous criminal acts against members of the Serbian community and the international security forces create the impression in and outside Kosovo that there exists the intent to cleanse this land from the presence of all Serbs, in total rejection of the idea of a multi-ethnic cohabitation in Kosovo".

Attacks on churches have also spread to neighbouring Bosnia. The Holy Virgin's Birth Orthodox Church in Bugojno was also attacked, and its roof set on fire late yesterday (18 March), parish priest Fr Slavisa Djuriscic reported.

In the wake of the attacks on fourteen Orthodox churches and other sites in Kosovo in the night of 17 to 18 March, mobs made reprisal attacks on mosques in the Serbian capital Belgrade, the southern Serbian city of Nis and on the Islamic community headquarters in the town of Novi Sad in the northern Vojvodina region, leaving them gutted (see F18News 18 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=280).

Visiting the remains of the mosque in Nis on 18 March Forum 18 saw the roof totally destroyed, the inside gutted and the minaret damaged. The walls have been daubed with Serbian nationalist graffiti, such as "Out of our land – this is Serbia!" Police are now guarding the remains of the building, and local people come to look at it as though it were a museum exhibit.

The Catholic bishops of Serbia and Montenegro condemned the wave of violence. "With deep sorrow we commiserate with the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Faith Community because of the destruction and burning of the sacral sites, churches and mosques," they declared on 18 March. "Such destruction and burning represent acts deserving strong condemnation and regret, because they are putting down civilisation and especially the possibility of coexistence and mutual respect."

The Serbian government has been in permanent emergency session, while on 18 March the United Nations Security Council denounced "the large-scale inter-ethnic violence", calling for the province's authorities to ensure that the rule of law is maintained, all ethnic communities feel properly secure and the perpetrators of crimes are brought to justice.

Today (18 March) the government has organised a procession from the government building in Belgrade to the city's St Sava cathedral. Church bells across the country will toll.

For more background information, see Forum 18's latest Kosovo religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=137

A printer-friendly map of Kosovo & Serbia (map title Serbia and Montenegro) is available at

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

The map follows international legal usage in indicating the boundaries of territories. Kosovo is in international law part of Serbia & Montenegro, although administered by the UN.

A printer-friendly map of Bosnia-Herzegovina is available at

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

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