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KOSOVO & SERBIA: Destruction worse than initially believed, and violence sparks incidents in Montenegro, Bosnia and Macedonia

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

At least 28 people were killed, about 1,000 injured and 30 Orthodox churches and monasteries in Kosovo were destroyed during the recent violence by Albanian mobs against the minority Serbian population, KFOR and UNMIK units. Numbers are not yet final. The Serbian Orthodox Church is today demanding that German KFOR troops be withdrawn from duty in for "incompetence" during the violence, as they failed to save from destruction ten historic churches and other Orthodox property. Witnesses stated that the German KFOR troops did nothing to protect any of the sites. Also, the diocese blames UNMIK for failing to protect its sites in the period from 1999 to before the present violence, during which 112 Orthodox churches were destroyed without any attackers being arrested. In Serbia, the authorities have arrested 120 people for attacks against mosques in Belgrade and Nis, and religious leaders, political parties and the government have joined in condemned the burning of the two mosques. City officials have promised to refurbish the Belgrade mosque, and the police chief and his deputy have been fired. However, the Kosovo violence also probably sparked incidents elsewhere in Serbia, and in neighbouring Montenegro, Bosnia and Macedonia.

Fr Sava (Janjic), deputy abbot of the Decani monastery, has told Forum 18 News Service that the Serbian Orthodox diocese of Raska and Prizren will issue a strong demand to the KFOR international peacekeeping force that German KFOR troops be withdrawn from duty in Kosovo for their "incompetence" during the anti-Serb violence at the hands of ethnic Albanian mobs that broke out on 17 March. German KFOR units were assigned to protect Serbs and Serbian property in the town of Prizren, but failed to save from destruction ten historic churches and other Orthodox property – including a fourteenth century church, a monastery and six other churches, the bishop's residence and a seminary.

Fr Sava told Forum 18 that witnesses and monks from Prizren had told him German KFOR troops did nothing to protect any of the sites. Ethnic Albanians urinated on the remains of the destroyed churches in Prizren, and painted the slogans "Death to Serbs" and "Down with UNMIK" on one church.

At least thirty Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries in Kosovo were burned and/or destroyed during the clashes between Albanian mobs and the minority Serbian population, KFOR and UNMIK units. Reports say that 28 people were killed and about a thousand injured, but the numbers are not final.

The diocese blames the United Nations administration UNMIK for failing to protect its sites in the period before the latest violence. "In addition to the direct perpetrators of crime, not only in the last several days but during the course of the past five post-war years, none of whom have been brought to justice, direct responsibility for the latest expulsions, murders and destruction of the precious cultural heritage under the protection of UNESCO is borne by UNMIK." the Orthodox diocese complained on 22 March. The diocese is daily issuing an updated list of destroyed and damaged Christian shrines in Kosovo.

Before the latest outbreak of violence, 112 Orthodox churches had been destroyed since the UN with NATO took over the administration of Kosovo in 1999. No-one who took part in any of these attacks has ever been arrested by UNMIK, KFOR, or the mainly ethnically Albanian Kosovo Protection Service.

"The silence from the expert world regarding the destructions in Kosovo is hurting," Mirjana Menkovic, president of Belgrade-based Mnemosyne, an organisation consisting of experts in the field of cultural and spiritual heritage and protection, told Forum 18 on 24 March. "I wonder what happened to their ethical code if their professional orientation is turned into some other direction." She reported that they had tried to initiate an international conference on the defence and protection of the heritage in Kosovo, but have not so far received a satisfactory answer.

"We in Serbia need to coordinate all of our efforts and knowledge, both governmental and independent expert teams, in attempt to save the remnants," Menkovic insisted. "There are international conventions regarding these sites, but they are not protected. We need to speak to our Kosovo Albanian colleagues regarding a shared responsibility and also about consistent respect for existing regulations."

The World Council of Churches and the European Conference of Churches declared on 19 March that churches and religious communities "must reject any attempt, from any quarter, to use religion as a motivating factor for conflict" and "should raise their voice to confront the new wave of violent intolerance and extremism".

"The thesis on the political churches in Kosovo failed," says Fr Sava, deputy abbot of the Decani Monastery, told Forum 18 on 24 March. "The idea that the Serbs under Milosevic built churches in order to expel Albanians does not stand up, because there are numerous churches and monasteries destroyed that are from the 14th, 16th, 18th and 19th centuries. The issue here is the systematic destruction of Orthodox sites in Kosovo and Metohija."

Reshat Maliqi, adviser to the mainly ethnic Albanian Kosovo police in Gjilan region, claimed on 22 March that only one Orthodox Church was burned down in the Gjilan region of seven municipalities. He claimed that the only church in the region that was burned was in the Varosh neighbourhood of Ferizaj [Urosevac]. He went on to say that "there were some efforts to burn down the church in Viti [Vitina], but fortunately only causing light damage, whereas the churches in Gjilan and Kamenice [Kosovska Kamenica] were not touched at all."

"His statement is misleading," says Fr Sava. "The church of St Uros in Urosevac was burned, after it was defended by the Greek troops. There were 18 of them wounded and hurt. The church in Kamenica was stoned, and the parochial home in Vitina was damaged. Also, the church in Varos was burned. We still have a report about two small, local churches in Urosevac neighbourhood that we hear has been burned. We are still investigating it."

Alexander Birvis, president of the Association for Religious Freedom in Serbia, described the Kosovo church burnings as "a blow to religious freedom", stressing that freedom of religion "is also freedom to worship, to have religious festivals, to have religious sites, and also to have religious clerics performing rites". "Even a temporarily abandoned or closed religious site still represents a valid site," he told Forum 18 in Novi Sad on 23 March. "The destruction of such is an attack on people's religious consciousness, in this case of Orthodox believers. The destruction of a church represents an attack on a site, the religious rites performed there and the religious consciousness of the people. It also represents an act of desacralisation."

Meanwhile in Serbia, the authorities have taken action in response to the arson attacks on mosques in the capital Belgrade and the southern city of Nis. In Nis, the authorities have charged ten people under the criminal code with "organised vandalism" for the burning of the Islam-aga mosque in Nis during the night of 17-18 March. The attackers broke a lock at the entrance door, demolished the interior and set fire to the mosque, which burned completely. If convicted they face sentences of up to five years in prison.

In Belgrade, 110 people have been arrested for the burning of the Bajrakli mosque, but it is still unknown whether any will be charged with criminal offences. Due to the passive police reaction to the burning, Serbia's Interior Minister Dragan Jovic on 22 March fired both the Belgrade city police chief and his deputy.

All political parties, the government and public figures have joined in condemning the burning of the two mosques in Serbia. Belgrade city officials promised the Islamic faith community that the city will pay to refurbish the mosque, which survived two world wars and many other upheavals in the last centuries. Condemnation of the burning of the mosques also came from the nuns of the Pecka Patrijarsija convent in Kosovo. Bishop Joanikije of Budimlje and Niksic, who was at the convent during the clashes in Kosovo, quoted a nun as declaring: "Those burning mosques in Belgrade are doing no good to Kosovo."

However, during the period of 18-20 March, several more incidents took place in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Macedonia, probably as an echo of the tragic events in Kosovo.

In Serbia, on the evening of 18 March, a Protestant Bible Cultural Centre in Nis was set on fire by Molotov cocktails thrown by a mob of about 30 perpetrators, the day after the mosque was burned in the same city. "This act of terror has caused fear and anxiety not only on the part of us who run this Centre, but also on the part of all who are in any way connected with it, including the neighbours," Obrad Nikolic, Church of God minister, told Forum 18 on 22 March from Nis. The Centre held a small book, audio and video library, held public theological lectures and showed Christian films.

The mosque in Oraovica, near Presevo in southern Serbia, was set on fire on 19 March, but the fire was extinguished and one perpetrator arrested, who was later explained to be a local Albanian with some mental problems. Damage was minor, with only a few books burned.

The Islamic faith community in Novi Pazar reported on 20 March that the mosque in Mali Zvornik was stoned, suffering broken windows, while Muslims in Loznica were not feeling safe after receiving threats. They asked for government protection.

In Montenegro, the Serbian Tanjug news agency reported that five minors were detained in the city of Podgorica on 20 March for allegedly threatening to set fire to the city's mosque and singing anti-Albanian songs. Police interviewed the minors and their parents before releasing them.

In Bosnia, the Interior Minister Mevludin Halilovic has condemned the burning of the Serbian Orthodox Church of the Holy Mother of God in Bugojno in central Bosnia on 18 March. He expressed his gratitude to city officials who reacted promptly to this incident. Police arrested several people in relation to this burning but no names have yet been released.

In Republika Srpska, the Serbian-ruled part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the night of 21-22 March, an explosive device was thrown at the entrance of the mosque in Orahova, near Gradiska. This mosque was destroyed on the same date in 1993, and was only rebuilt and reopened last year. The bomb caused minor damage to the facade of the building and all the windows were broken. Local mufti Edham Camdzic did not rule out the possibility that the attack might have been against the return of Bosniaks (people of the Muslim faith) to this region, and that it may be unrelated to the Kosovo clashes.

In Macedonia, unknown perpetrators threw three petrol bombs made of beer bottles at the entrance door of the mosque in Kumanovo. Fortunately, only one of the beer bottles broke and, although a fire started, the building did not suffer damage. Police protected all religious sites in Kumanovo that night and opened an investigation.

Also in Macedonia, Skopje-based TV station A-1 reported on 24 March that two small churches, St John's and the Holy Mother of God, had been demolished near the village of Romanovce in the Kumanovo region of northern Macedonia. It is possible that the attacks were related to the attack on the Kumanovo mosque on 20 March.

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

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

See also F18News 18 March http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=280 , 19 March http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=282 and 19 March http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=283 for more reports on the latest violence.

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>

A printer-friendly map of Macedonia is available from

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

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