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MACEDONIA: Monastery demolished – another church demolition planned, and Metropolitan to be jailed?

By Drasko Djenovic, Forum 18

A Macedonian government official, Dr Cane Mojanovski, has refused to confirm or deny to Forum 18 News Service reports that the government intends to demolish the Serbian Orthodox Church in the village of Luzani. The reports follow the surprise night-time destruction of the St John Chrysostom Monastery in Nizepole, southern Macedonia – which contained Metropolitan Jovan (Vranisskovski) and about 10 monks and nuns – by approximately 500 police armed with automatic weapons, and demolition workers with bulldozers. The monastery was the cathedral of the Archbishopric of Ohrid, and was earlier this year attacked by a paramilitary 'state security' unit armed with machine guns. Officials in Bitola have refused to discuss the monastery demolition with Forum 18. Metropolitan Jovan is separately being threatened with an 18 month jail sentence, and told Forum 18 that he expects his appeal against the sentence will be turned down.

Dr Cane Mojanovski, president of the Macedonian government's committee for relations with religious communities, refused to confirm or deny to Forum 18 News Service on 20 October reports from Metropolitan Jovan (Vranisskovski) and the media in Belgrade that the Macedonian government intends to demolish a Serbian Orthodox church in Luzani village, near Prilep in south central Macedonia, referring all enquiries to the building inspectorate. Metropolitan Jovan told Forum 18 that the church is threatened with destruction even though a building permit was issued for it in September. Metropolitan Jovan heads the Macedonian archbishopric of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which is not recognised by the Macedonian government (see F18News 23 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=418).

The intended church demolition comes after the sudden and unexpected demolition, just before midnight on the night of 15-16 October, of the Serbian Orthodox monastery of St John Chrysostom in the village of Nizepole, near Bitola in southern Macedonia. About 500 police from the capital Skopje, armed with automatic weapons, surrounded the monastery while Metropolitan Jovan was inside with about 10 monks and nuns. At the same time, police blocked the Ohrid – Bitola – Nizepole road. Workers then used bulldozers to demolish the monastery, as well as walls stabilising the steep terrain on which the monastery was built. The monastery was the cathedral of the Serbian Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid, in Macedonia.

The authorities have claimed that the reason for the monastery's demolition is that it did not have a building permit. Forum 18 made eight calls on 21 October to various officials of the Bitola administration, but no-one was prepared to discuss the reasons for monastery's demolition. Once Forum 18 had explained why it was calling, officials immediately referred the questions to other offices.

Dr Mojanovski told Forum 18 that he cannot comment on the acts of other state institutions, and that the demolition of church buildings is under the authority of the building inspectorate.

The monastery was built in a village, and in its vicinity are more than 50 solidly-constructed buildings none of which has a building permit, as is normal in Macedonia for villages of this type. The land on which the monastery stood belongs to Metropolitan Jovan's parents, Galina and Argira Vranisskovski, and their house – which was recently robbed and damaged by fire - is about 100 metres (100 yards) from the site of the monastery. Even though in planning terms their house, like the other village houses, has the same legal status as the monastery, the building inspectorate has shown no interest in any of the village's houses.

Metropolitan Jovan told Forum 18 on 20 October that he had gone to Bitola's building inspectorate after the monastery's destruction to ask for the formal legal decree ordering the destruction, but officials told him that there was no decree. They said they had received an order from Skopje and then placed an "information paper" announcing the intended demolition of the monastery on the town hall noticeboard. When Metropolitan Jovan asked to see a copy of this "information paper", the officials told him that they no longer had it.

The demolition is the latest in a long series of attacks by Macedonian authorities on the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia. Among numerous other incidents, Metropolitan Jovan has been jailed, as well as another bishop and a monk fined (see F18News 28 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=238), and the now-demolished monastery was attacked last February

with machine guns by a paramilitary "state security unit" (see F18News 24 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=259).

A day before the destruction of the monastery, 15 October, Metropolitan Jovan received the results of an appeal against a mid-August court decision that he be sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment for "spreading religious, national and racist intolerance", charges he rejects (see F18News 23 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=418). He told Forum 18 that he has 15 days to make another appeal, but that he expects that this will be turned down and that he will be sent to jail again.

The Macedonian state has prevented any rival Orthodox jurisdiction to the Macedonian Orthodox Church from existing in the country (see F18News 23 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=418). On 18 October the MIA state news agency reported that "representatives of the Macedonian Orthodox Church clergy and monastic order fully support the Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church in its efforts to preserve the church, its name, autocephaly status and dignity". The Macedonian Orthodox Church claimed autocephaly (complete independence) from the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1967, but no other canonical Orthodox Church in the world recognises this.

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 recognised name of Macedonia in international law is "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia".

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