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KOSOVO: No protection in capital for attacked Orthodox Church and Priest

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

Despite repeated requests for protection, including requests made personally two weeks ago to the KFOR commander, adaquate protection for a Serbian Orthodox Church and its priest in Kosovo's capital Pristina has not been provided since the removal of KFOR guards at the end of 2002. Attacks have become frequent and on 10 May many church windows were broken. Parish priest Fr Miroslav Popadic told Forum 18 News Service that "I open the church gates only on Sunday mornings and on major holidays for the faithful to come to liturgy, otherwise, if someone comes to church without a call in advance I do not open the gates. When I visit local villages, I make the sign of the cross, sit in my car and drive fast at my own risk". KFOR's commander told Fr Popadic he "cannot give any more troops for the protection of churches". No arrests have been made since for the attacks on Orthodox churches since 1999 and KFOR has not replied to Forum 18 News Service's questions on this latest attack, or to questions about the security of Orthodox churches and monasteries.

The Serbian Orthodox Church of St Nicholas in Kosovo's capital Pristina was again stoned after nightfall on 10 May by unknown attackers, leaving many church windows broken. Parish priest Fr Miroslav Popadic told Forum 18 News Service on 12 May that such attacks have become frequent since protection for the church provided by the Nato-led KFOR peacekeepers was removed at the end of last year. United Nations (UNMIK) police visited the site to take evidence and opened an investigation, but did not issue any statements to the press. The Raska and Prizren Orthodox diocese, which is headed by Bishop Artemije (Radosavljevic), issued a statement on 11 May strongly condemning the "repeated stoning" of the church and demanding "appropriate measures to prevent further attacks".

"There have been various attacks on this church before," reported Fr Popadic, the only remaining priest serving the once thriving parish. "On 27 December 2000 a hand grenade was thrown into the churchyard, causing minor damage. But people keep stoning my apartment regularly, since I live in the parish house in the yard."

He said the grenade attack had occurred while KFOR troops were still protecting the church. During January, he reported, two police officers kept guard, one from the UNMIK police and the other from the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC), a local police force mainly made up of ethnic Albanians. He said that during February the church was guarded only by a single KPC officer, while for the last month and a half the church has had no protection at all. "No wonder the extremists are encouraged."

"Bishop Artemije personally sent a written warning to international representatives in Pristina that KFOR should resecure the church and the parish hall," the diocesan statement declared. "Regrettably, this appeal did not result in a favourable response." The diocese warned that the stoning of St Nicholas' church "once again proves that removing security patrols protecting religious sites located in risk zones represents a dangerous experiment, possibly leading to serious and undesirable consequences."

Two weeks ago, in the wake of Bishop Artemije's letter, KFOR commander Lt-Gen. Fabio Mini visited Fr Popadic, accompanied by police officers. "I complained that I am unable to walk freely even in the churchyard, let alone in the streets of Pristina, that often in the night from 9pm to midnight my apartment is stoned, and that there are fewer than 200 Serbs now living in the whole of Pristina," Fr Popadic told Forum 18. "The police promised more frequent patrols, while General Mini told me we have to move forward and that he cannot give any more troops for the protection of churches."

Fr Popadic says he is living in a state of siege. "I open the church gates only on Sunday mornings and on major holidays for the faithful to come to liturgy," he told Forum 18. "Otherwise, if someone comes to church without a call in advance I do not open the gates. When I visit local villages, I make the sign of the cross, sit in my car and drive fast at my own risk."

The Church of St Nicholas was built in 1830 on the remains of the medieval monastery of St Nicholas. Only four years ago there were four priests serving the parish. Today Fr Popadic serves a community of 130 Serbs living in Pristina, 70 Serbian translators working for UNMIK in the city and hopes to start visiting a retirement home again where about 50 Serbian pensioners live.

More than a hundred Orthodox churches have been destroyed or badly damaged in Kosovo since the international community took

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control of the province in 1999. The most recent attacks were reported last November, when the church in the village of Ljubovo near Istok was blown up and the church in Djurakovac was also attacked. No arrests have been made for the attacks since 1999 and KFOR has made no response to Forum 18 News Service's questions on this latest attack, or to other questions about the security of Orthodox churches and monasteries.

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