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KOSOVO & SERBIA: Churches & mosques destroyed amid inter-ethnic violence

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Large scale violence in Kosovo and Serbia before the 5th anniversary of Nato's bombing raids has seen many Serbian Orthodox churches and mosques attacked, amid disputed suggestions, including by an un-named UNMIK official, that the violence in Kosovo was planned as a "pogrom against Serbs: churches are on fire and people are being attacked for no other reason than their ethnic background", Forum 18 News Service has learnt. In the Serbian capital Belgrade and in the southern city of Nis, mobs set two mosques on fire despite the pleas of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In Belgrade, Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral personally pleaded with the mob and urged police and firefighters to react and preserve "what could be preserved". After initial hesitation for fear of the mob, firefighters and police did intervene, so the Belgrade mosque, which is "under state protection", was saved from complete destruction. In Kosovo since 1999, many attacks have been made on Orthodox shrines, without UNMIK, KFOR, or the mainly ethnically Albanian Kosovo Protection Service making any arrests of attackers.

Some of the Serbian Orthodox Church's most revered shrines have been burnt amid the upsurge of inter-ethnic violence that erupted in Kosovo on 17 March, leaving at least 22 people dead and several hundred wounded. Many of the Orthodox churches attacked were sheltering Serbs who had fled in fear from their homes. In apparent retaliation, two mosques have been extensively damaged after being set on fire in the Serbian capital Belgrade and in the central Serbian town of Nis. In Belgrade, Orthodox Metropolitan Amfilohije stepped in to urge firefighters to resist the mobs and to put out the fire in the mosque.

The violence came just days ahead of the fifth anniversary of the launch of Nato's air raids in 1999 and the period around the anniversary is usually a tense time. The attacks are also taking place in the unofficial run-up to Kosovo's autumn parliamentary elections. Last week, a hand grenade was thrown at the home of Ibrahim Rugova, who is more moderate than most ethnic Albanian politicians. It is believed that this attack was the work of Albanian extremists.

"Last night there was anarchy rather than orchestrated violence," Pastor Artur Krasniqi, who leads the 150-strong Fellowship of the Lord's People, an ethnic Albanian Protestant Church in Pristina, told Forum 18 from the city on 18 March. "It is shocking that something like this could happen in a day." He condemned the attacks, including those on Serbs and Serbian Orthodox churches. "I feel ashamed. Everyone has lost." He said no mosques or Protestant churches in Kosovo appear to have been attacked.

Pastor Krasniqi said he believed the attacks were launched for ethnic, not religious reasons. "The Orthodox Church is the only institution that has kept the Serbian community alive here," he told Forum 18. "The Orthodox Church has played a political role, so it has always paid the price." He described the upsurge in violence as a failure on the part of the United Nations administration UNMIK and KFOR, views echoed by Kosovo's Serbian minority. "I was out in the streets of Pristina yesterday and it was shameful that KFOR was not there. UNMIK's reaction too was very confused."

These latest attacks have followed many such attacks since 1999 on Orthodox sites, and in no case have any arrests of attackers been made by UNMIK, KFOR, or the mainly ethnically Albanian Kosovo Protection Service (eg. see F18News 8 January http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=224).

Fr Sava (Janjic) of the Decani monastery in western Kosovo agreed with Pastor Krasniqi that the attacks were ethnically motivated, and argued that they were organised in a bid to promote the final ethnic cleansing of the Serbian population from Kosovo. "It was a real Kristallnacht," he told Forum 18 from Decani on 18 March, referring to the Nazis' attack on Jews, synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses in Germany in 1938.

He claimed that Albanian media had fabricated the original spark for the violence – the death of two Albanian children in the river Ibar in the ethnically-divided town of Mitrovica in northern Kosovo. "UNMIK said yesterday that there was no Serbian involvement in their death at all," Fr Sava told Forum 18. "The entire story was inflated by the Albanian media. Everything was planned."

The Belgrade-based B92 also quoted an unnamed UNMIK official as speaking of "Kristallnacht". "What is happening in Kosovo must unfortunately be described as a pogrom against Serbs: churches are on fire and people are being attacked for no other reason

than their ethnic background."

The Fellowship of the Lord's People told Forum 18 late on 17 March of its concern about the inter-ethnic violence. "In almost every town and city there are riots and protests – attacks against Albanians, Serbs, UN and KFOR alike." Church members had gathered to pray that evening and had called a day of prayer and fasting for 18 March. "Please join us in praying for an end to this escalation of violence, anarchy and chaos and instead for peace and God's mercy on our land." It also called for prayer for protection for UN staff who were members of the church "and whose lives have been put in danger tonight".

The riots in Kosovo flared on 17 March in Mitrovica, after the disputed death of two ethnic Albanian children. Albanians attacked the Serbian-populated Northern Mitrovica and then riots spread to Serbian-populated enclaves throughout Kosovo. International peacekeepers from KFOR and UNMIK struggled to restore law and order.

In the southern town of Prizren all the Serbian Orthodox sanctuaries were set on fire. The diocesan house, the theological faculty, the fourteenth century church of the Ljeviska Holy Mother, the monastery of the Holy Archangels, and also the church of St Saviour, which is on the hills just outside the town, were all set on fire and destroyed. The Church had evacuated the archive, library and museum exhibits from Prizren only a day earlier. The seven monks from the Holy Archangels monastery had been evacuated to a German KFOR base shortly before it was set on fire. The Orthodox have complained that German KFOR forces were "not ready to protect the monastery".

A church in the eastern town of Kamenica was stoned twice, while the patriarchal seat in Gracanica monastery near Pristina was threatened with being set on fire. The Raska and Prizren Orthodox diocese reported in the afternoon of 17 March that "several mortar shells have fallen not far from Visoki Decani Monastery which were fired by Albanians at the monastery. Italian forces are presently protecting the Monastery. U.S. special forces are expected to arrive soon to reinforce defences." The monastery, located in western Kosovo, is vulnerable to attack from the surrounding hills.

Fr Sava told Forum 18 that in the violence fifteen Orthodox sites were burnt, many of them being destroyed. He listed burnt churches in Pec, Djakovica, Urosevac, two in Kosovo Polje, Pristina, Gnjilane, Belo Polje and Obilic, and above all in Prizren, which saw the worst attacks. He described the burning of the fourteenth century cathedral as "the greatest loss". Although some priests and monks were among the injured Serbs, no clergy deaths were reported. He said the nuns of the Pec convent were safe at present under strong Italian KFOR protection.

Tens of thousands of people demonstrated on the streets of Novi Sad, Nis and Belgrade during the night of 17-18 March. They clashed with riot police, notably in Belgrade where dozens of police officers were injured. The most serious unrest was in front of the Serbian government building, the United States embassy and the seventeenth century Bajrakli mosque, the only mosque in Belgrade. The mob broke through the police line, then set the mosque on fire just after midnight. Fresh police, firefighters and ambulance crews, who arrived shortly after the fire broke out, did not dare to come closer to the mosque in fear of the mob, which mostly consisted of young fans from Belgrade's sports clubs. Several reporters were also injured and their cameras destroyed.

Soon after the fire broke out, the Orthodox Metropolitan Amfilohije (Radovic) of Montenegro and the Littoral came out to the front of the mob and pleaded with them to stop the violence. Then, surrounded by a small number of people protecting him, he went to the police and firefighters standing nearby, asking them to react and preserve "what could be preserved". "The children are playing dangerous games, but grown men should react," he told them. After initial hesitation, the firefighters did intervene, so the Belgrade mosque, which is "under state protection", was saved from complete destruction.

Hamdija Ephenđi Jusufspahic, a retired leader of Serbia's Islamic community, told the press later in the night that he was unable to enter the mosque and that this was "a terrible day for us all". He also thanked Metropolitan Amfilohije for his intervention.

The mosque in Nis was set on fire about 10.30 pm, after thousands of demonstrators came in front of it. Although firefighters soon arrived, they were prevented from coming closer to the mosque by a mob, which stopped them from tackling the fire for another 45 minutes. The inside of the mosque was completely burnt-out, as was one minaret. Attacks also took place on Muslim property in Novi Sad.

At Belgrade's mosque today (18 March), Forum 18 saw six wrecked and burnt cars, three of them police vehicles. The mosque is standing, but the inside is burnt out, though the medressa behind the mosque was not burnt. Police guarding the entrance told Forum 18 an official investigation is in progress. Firefighters are still extinguishing small fires in cars. Completely destroyed is a third building in the mosque yard, used for religious education of children, and a storage facility. Belgrade's mayor has visited the mosque and spoken to the mufti. Ironically, they met on 17 March and agreed to provide a new facade and lights.

The Serbian government held an emergency session late on 17 March and the United Nations Security Council called an emergency meeting for 18 March.

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.

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