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MACEDONIA: Serbian Bishop sentenced to Solitary Confinement

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

Serbian Orthodox Bishop Jovan was arrested in Macedonia, on Sunday, for attempting to perform a baptism in a Macedonian Orthodox Church and was sentenced to five days' solitary confinement in prison. The Macedonian government has claimed to Forum 18 News Service that it "has no links with this arrest, it is an issue of public peace and order". Serbian prime minister Zoran Zivkovic has stated that the Serbian and Montenegrin ministers of Foreign and of Religious affairs will protest to the Macedonian authorities about both this sentence and the ban on Serbian Orthodox priests entering Macedonia in their vestments.

Metropolitan Jovan (Vranisskovski) of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) has been arrested in Bitola, Macedonia on Sunday 20 July 2003. He was trying to baptise a grandchild of his sister in a Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC), the Church of the Great Martyr Dimitrije, was prevented from doing so and then arrested and sentenced to five days solitary confinement.

Metropolitan Jovan left the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) last year after a Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) invitation to end a 35 years long schism between the SOC and MOC, and was installed as the SOC bishop and patriarchal exarch for all of the dioceses of the Ohrid archbishopric only ten days ago.

"Relatives of Bishop Jovan stated that he is in prison in Bitola, in solitary confinement," reported KIM Radio service on 21 July. "No one is allowed to see him or to talk to him." Relatives and co-workers of Bishop Jovan are concerned about his medical condition, because they claim that he was brutally arrested and physically molested afterwards.

The Macedonian Orthodox Church claimed on 22 July that the Metropolitan "violated the MOC and has endangered its spiritual and material values, violating the sanctity, order and peace of the Temple as well as the safety of the priests and believers.

"The Ministry of Interior or the Macedonian government has no links with the church canonical issues or disputes in this regard," Mirjana Konteska of the Macedonian Ministry of the Interior told Forum 18 on 22 July. "To our knowledge, Mr. Jovan Vranisskovski, was defrocked from the Macedonian Orthodox Church three weeks ago and thus has no legal rights to perform religious rites in religious sites. He has made an attempt to baptise a child in the church of St. Dimitrije in Bitola, an active church of the MOC. He was not allowed to do so by the priests in the church, the police were called by them, on charges of disturbing public peace and order regulation. He resisted an officer, and after arrest he, and his party, were brought before a magistrate judge, who sentenced him to five days in prison for disturbance of public peace and order and resisting a police officer. Again, this has no links with the government or Interior ministry, it was all done locally, according to public order regulations. Mr. Vranisskovski party was released after an informative questioning in the police station. The investigating judge will decide whether there is a place for criminal charges."

KIM Radio and the Info-service of the Raska and Prizren Diocese, who first reported on this incident, stated that "Bishop Jovan who accepted the SOC invitation to leave the MOC... was lately under specially strong pressure of hierarchs of MOC, local media and the Macedonian police."

Since renewed disputes between SOC and MOC after negotiations broke down in June 2002, several incidents have been reported. In the last two weeks, Macedonian border police prevented SOC monks, priests and bishops, from entering Macedonia in their priestly vestments. In May, four Greek Orthodox priests were turned back from the border for the same reason. However, this is a part of wider governmental policy that affects priests and clerics of the SOC travelling to Macedonia.

Fr. Sava (Janjic), deputy abbot of the SOC Decani Monastery, told Forum 18 on 24 July that in 1994 he and other priests were prevented from entering Macedonia on their way to Mount Athos, the Holy Mountain, in Greece because they were wearing priestly vestments. "We had to travel through Bulgaria. It seemed that this measure was not implemented in all cases, but selectively. There were instances where we passed the border with no problems, so my impression is that every officer could decide whether to implement it or not. This was used frequently to humiliate the clerics of the SOC, who had to wait a long time for "consultations with Skopje", only to hear that they had to take off their vestments. My personal opinion is that one of the reasons for this 'measure' is an attempt to prevent Serbian priests from ministering to Serbian nationals, believers in northern Macedonia who wanted church services in their language and without the interference of 'macedonian national ideology' via the Church."

The Macedonian state news agency reported on 10 July that "The MOC will request state institutions to ban Vranisskovski from wearing the priest's wardrobe, as he was discharged and because a Serbian priest is not allowed to perform religious services in Macedonia." MOC Bishop Timotej stated that the "Macedonian Church will urge the relevant authorities to make sure that Zoran Vranisskovski never wears the insignia of a priest or bishop," adding that Vranisskovski does not have the right to the post of Serbian vicar in Macedonia. "According to the Holy Orthodox [Christian] canons, Zoran can not switch to any other Orthodox Church unless his mother church, i.e. the Macedonian Orthodox Church, agrees to it." The Macedonian Orthodox Church is not recognised by any other Orthodox Church.

The SOC told Forum 18 on 21 July that "all indications are that this is all according to an earlier prepared scenario, in order for the SOC, its hierarchy and the faithful people to be prevented from performing their world wide recognised religious rights."

Serbian Prime minister Zoran Zivkovic stated on 22 July 2003 that "There is no reason to deny to representatives of any church or religious community the fundamental human right to the freedom of movement if they have valid travel documents," noting that this might be a political act, rather than an act of customs or police offices. The Serbian and Montenegrin Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Serbian Minister of Religion will protest to the Macedonian authorities about the ban on SOC representatives entering Macedonia in their clerical vestments."

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