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KOSOVO: Religious freedom survey, September 2003

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In its survey analysis of the religious freedom situation in ethnically-divided Kosovo (Kosova in Albanian), Forum 18 News Service reports on the continuing systematic attacks in Serbian Orthodox churches, monasteries and graveyards. Although more than 100 have been damaged or destroyed since the international community took control in 1999, Forum 18 has found no evidence that anyone has been prosecuted for these attacks (just as no-one is known to have been prosecuted for Serbian paramilitary and army attacks on 215 mosques during the 1999 war). Protestant leaders have complained that ethnic Albanian church members from Muslim backgrounds at times suffer "persecution", often from family members. The international bodies ruling Kosovo have done little to promote religious freedom.

In ethnically-divided Kosovo (Kosova in Albanian), religious freedom has suffered because of the conflict. With 90 percent of the population made up of ethnic Albanians, most of whom are Muslim with a Catholic minority and a small number of Protestants and adherents of other faiths, ethnic Serbs are an embattled minority. Mostly Orthodox, their monuments consist largely of churches, monasteries and graveyards, all of which have been subjected to a sustained and organised campaign of attack. But the ethnic polarisation has left other religious minorities vulnerable.

Most members of non-Albanian Muslim minorities in Kosovo (Roma, Ashkali, Turks, Bosniaks and Gorancis) were forced to flee to Serbia during and after the 1999 war, but Islamic leaders in Belgrade have complained of the treatment of the estimated 2,000 that remain. Likewise, Croat Catholics also fled.

Serbian Protestant pastor Simo Ralevic – who was himself expelled from Pec (Peja) with other church members in 1999 - told Forum 18 that almost no Serbian Protestants now remain in Kosovo. Jehovah's Witness leaders report that all their ethnic Serb members fled the province in 1998 and 1999, but three ethnic Albanian congregations remain. Adventist leaders told Forum 18 that they have three churches (Pristina, Djakovica/Gjakova and Pec), with about 200 church members. Jewish leaders told Forum 18 that half the 100 or so Jews fled Kosovo during the war, but 30 of the 50 that remain have a community in Prizren. Hare Krishna representatives told Forum 18 they have no organised community, only a few individual adherents.

Despite Kosovo's status as a de facto international protectorate since NATO troops arrived in 1999 as Slobodan Milosevic's forces pulled out, religious freedom has been little protected. The competing mandates of the international bodies that govern Kosovo – the United Nations mission UNMIK, the OSCE mission and KFOR – together with the competing authority of the locally-elected government in Pristina and the Belgrade authorities that still insist that they have authority means that religious freedom concerns often fall between the different institutions.

Sunil Narula, a spokesman for UNMIK, failed to respond to Forum 18's enquiries as to what steps the mission was taking to promote religious freedom in general and to end the attacks on Serbian Orthodox sites.

Despite its mandate, which specifies that promotion of human rights is one of its duties, the OSCE Mission has done little to promote religious freedom, saying it has been forced to concentrate on other issues. "The OSCE Mission in Kosovo deals with many issues of human rights but freedom of religion is not one of them," Sven Lindholm, acting spokesperson at the OSCE Mission, told Forum 18 from Pristina on 20 August. "I cannot disagree with you that freedom of religion is an important right, yet there are a compendium of human rights issues which are faced in Kosovo that need direct and continual attention. The OSCE's primary focus is on minorities, smaller communities, ensuring that international human rights standards are not only part of legislation but also implemented."

KFOR's duties in the area of religious freedom consist mainly of responsibility for protecting Serbian religious sites. "By using a combination of fixed posts and mobile patrols, we continue to protect not only historic and religious patrimonial sites (irrespective of their particular religious or ethnic connections) but also the population and infrastructure of Kosovo in general," KFOR spokesman Wing-Commander Chris Thompson told Forum 18 on 28 August.

Life for the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo is difficult, mostly because the members of this church are Serbs who do not have freedom of movement and have to live in KFOR and UNMIK protected enclaves. Since the NATO intervention, 56 historic

churches, monasteries and sacral monuments – some of them dating back to the 14th and 15th centuries - have been burnt, looted, desecrated and destroyed, as well as 52 of more recent date.

In the last year, the most noticeable religious freedom violation facing Serbian Orthodox believers has been the desecration, looting and destruction of graveyards, although desecration of churches continues. In February and March, UNMIK police reported that unknown persons broke into the Orthodox chapel in the village of Zupce (built in 1938), broke the icons and desecrated the building.

In May Serbs visited their graveyard in Pec for the first time in four years, to discover that it had been converted into the city rubbish dump, half the tombstones had been knocked down, most of the marble gravestones were missing, and some of the graves had even been opened and dug in. After three days of cleaning and repairs, the Serbian group left the site, only to find out the next day that more tombstones were destroyed.

The Belgrade daily Danas reported on 11 May that "the graveyard in Zahac was cleaned by a bulldozer, and that in the villages of Babic, Glavcica, Svrke, Naklo, Brestovik, Ljevosa, Siga, Decani, at the Orthodox graveyards, there is not a single tombstone left undestroyed. Everything is also destroyed in Klinia, Petric and Drsnik, churches included."

Orthodox sources in Orahovac (Rahovec) reported on 14 May that local Albanians were driving tractors through a Serbian cemetery in the municipality, and that at the graveyard in Kosovska Vitina (Viti) a wooden cross that marked a grave was set on fire the day after a burial ceremony.

The Orthodox church in Pristina has been repeatedly attacked since May (see F18News 15 May 2003). The last attack came on 30 July, when several people again threw stones at the church and parish house.

On 28 May unknown attackers fired at Spanish KFOR sentries guarding the Orthodox convent of Gorioc, near Istok, while on 31 May a hand grenade was thrown at the Greek KFOR checkpoint protecting the St Czar Uros Church in the town of Urosevac (Ferizaj) in southern Kosovo. Five people were injured.

Fr Dragan Kojic from Kosovska Vitina reported on 29 June that fifteen more tombstones had been destroyed in the village's Orthodox graveyard. One of the latest incidents was the burning at the graveyard in Bresje, near Kosovo Polje (Fushe Kosove) where, according to reports, a number of graves were desecrated in mid-August.

Among recent incidents, on 21 August the Serbian cemetery in the village of Ponjesh, near Gnjilane (Gjilan), was set on fire, destroying tombstones and the Orthodox chapel.

In the evening of 27 August unknown persons, for the third time in four months, damaged the fence and gate in front of the Orthodox church of St. Demeterius, in the ethnically mixed village of Susica, just east of Gracanica.

Gunfire was reported on 28 August close to Sokolica Monastery during the Orthodox feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God. Pilgrims from Mitrovica and Zvecan were alarmed by this "provocation which was intended to spread fear among the Serb congregation", the Church complained.

David Perovic, professor at the Orthodox faculty in Belgrade who compiled a report on Kosovo for Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Pavle, declared that "destruction of the graves goes according to an established routine". He says this includes selling marble gravestones to local Muslim families for them to be reused as gravestones.

Many in the Albanian community refuse to see anything wrong with attacking Orthodox sites, pointing out that hundreds of mosques were destroyed by Serbian military and paramilitary forces during the 1999 war. An illustrated book published by the Islamic community shows 215 damaged or destroyed mosques, some of them up to 400 years old.

Xhabir Hamiti, a lecturer at the Faculty for Islamic Studies in Pristina and assistant to Kosovo's Chief Mufti, regards the number of damaged or destroyed Orthodox sites as "very symbolic" in comparison, and even claims that "no old Serbian monasteries were damaged during or after the War, even though some of them were under the control of the Kosova Liberation Army". His views were echoed by an assistant to Catholic bishop Marko Sopi of Prizren. "It's a reality that Orthodox churches have been attacked and destroyed," the assistant told Forum 18. "But also mosques were destroyed. Fewer Orthodox churches have been destroyed than mosques." He said the Catholic Church has "always" condemned all such attacks.

Albanians also regard many of the Orthodox churches built in the 1990s as "provocative" and assertions of Serbian ownership of the province. "When Milosevic came to power he had total control in Kosovo and during his government the Serbian Church built many churches in different regions in Kosovo," Hamiti told Forum 18. "Albanians call them political churches, because most were built in places where there were no Orthodox believers, like the church in the centre of the University of Pristina, which still exists in a very sensitive place."

Many Albanians also regard such attacks as justified reaction to the Serbian government's earlier attacks on the Albanian population. "The attacks on Serbian Orthodox churches and graveyards were based not on religious issues or on religious hatred," Hamiti insists, "but as revenge for crimes done by Serbs against Albanians in Kosovo, the mass graves, the burned houses, the 70 percent of burned villages and cities everywhere in Kosovo."

Although Thompson says KFOR remains "totally dedicated" to its commitments to defend religious sites, he declined to say how many people had been arrested and prosecuted for attacking Serbian Orthodox sites since 1999 (the Orthodox maintain that the number is zero), saying only that KFOR works "tirelessly with our colleagues in the UNMIK Police and Kosovo Police Service to support the early detection and successful prosecution of all criminal acts wherever and whenever they occur".

UNMIK officials likewise were unable to tell Forum 18 how many prosecutions there had been for attacks on Orthodox sites since 1999. "I don't recall any prosecutions for this crime, very unfortunately," UNMIK spokesperson Andrea Angeli told Forum 18 on 27 August. Angeli's colleague Niraj Singh reported that there had been many acts of arson, graffiti and throwing stones against Orthodox sites in the last few years, but said UNMIK did not keep statistics of crimes categorised by the nature of the target.

Thompson declined to say whether KFOR believed the security of Serbian sites was improving or worsening, or to elaborate on the process of handing over security responsibilities to the locally-recruited Kosovo Police Service (KPS), a body the Serbs regard with great suspicion.

Forum 18 has found no evidence either that security is improving or that KFOR, UNMIK or the KPS are taking any steps to halt the attacks on religious sites and track down and arrest the perpetrators. Nor has it found evidence that anyone has been prosecuted either for attacks on Serbian Orthodox sites since 1999 (just as no-one is known to have been prosecuted for the attacks on mosques during the war).

Security concerns restrict the Orthodox in other activities. "Theoretically, there is no problem building new churches, but in practice this is not possible anywhere outside the Serbian enclaves," Fr Sava (Janjic), deputy abbot of the Decani Monastery, told Forum 18. "It is not possible to rebuild or restore even one of the 112 damaged or destroyed churches in zones outside the enclaves, because these churches would be attacked again and destroyed."

The Decani monastery was directly responsible for saving the lives of many ethnic Albanians during the 1999 war, but this does not appear to have made a difference to the monastery's security situation.

Fr Sava said that in summer 2002 the local Orthodox bishop, Artemije (Radosavljevic), asked for permission to restore the 14th century Zociste Monastery near Orahovac. "But we did not get permission from the German KFOR, because there is a lack of adequate security and also because of protests from the Albanian Muslim population living nearby." Only one fourteenth century monastery is being restored at Banjska near Zvecan, within a Serbian enclave and with finance from the Serbian government.

Fr Sava added that there is no freedom of movement for Orthodox priests. "They cannot move freely outside the enclaves and visit churches. These visitations are possible only if organised in advance and with the assistance of KFOR or UNMIK police." Nor is it safe for Orthodox believers to visit graveyards, except on organised visitations. "For instance, in Prizren, our priest is not allowed to visit his 68 parishioners in their homes. The only way for them is all to come to the well-protected church building."

Fr Sava declared that according to the law there is no favoured religion in Kosovo. "But in practice and in daily life, the Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church are at the margin of society and the leading Kosovo institutions take no care of this community." Symptomatic of this, Fr Sava complained that the Orthodox Church has no access to Kosovo radio and TV, and has no media of its own.

However, in Serbian enclaves religious education is organised in coordination with the Orthodox Church and the Serbian Ministry of Education, and follows the syllabus in Serbia.

In the 22 Evangelical churches in Kosovo almost all members are ethnic Albanians and Western missionaries. A July document "Religious Freedom Report for the Protestant Evangelicals in Kosovo", sent to Forum 18 by local Protestants, notes that many Kosovar Albanian Protestants are afraid to declare themselves Protestant Christians for fear of persecution from local Albanians. Dubbed "secret believers", they attend church services without the knowledge of their families and communities.

Other Protestants in Kosovo confirmed to Forum 18 that church members from Muslim backgrounds face intermittent "persecution", including from family members.

Evangelical leaders met Kosovar government officials a number of times and even discussed their concerns with the prime minister, Bajram Rexhepi. Two Evangelical churches, in Djakovica and Mitrovica, were granted licences for church buildings and more new buildings are planned.

However, the report says foreign Protestant missionaries are treated well and are respected by the general population. "They do not fear for themselves and for their own safety, but are troubled that the national believers live in fear with the constant threat of persecution... Sometimes the entire family is threatened with ostracism even though only one member is a Protestant believer. This always leads to intensified family pressure and, on occasion, to actual beatings suffered by the believer."

The Protestants attribute such pressure to Muslim extremists. "The radical Muslim fractions causing this suffering attend local mosques and are hidden and protected by these mosques, whose official line is that they have nothing to do with extremist groups," the report alleges. "The general consensus amongst missionaries and national church leaders is that a more aggressive Islamic movement is increasing."

On 11 May a member of the Evangelical Church in Gnjilane - previously a Muslim - was severely beaten after receiving several earlier threats. In anonymous phone calls he was accused of being a "cross-follower" and a "traitor".

Hamiti for one dismisses such reports of difficulties for ethnic Albanian Protestants. "Personally I do not have any information that they experience fear from radical Islamists," he told Forum 18. "Some of the pastors are my friends and they have never mentioned that to me."

Protestant church buildings have several times been targeted and broken into, with equipment stolen. "Frequently, although these incidents were reported to the authorities, police does not investigate them adequately and does not pursue the perpetrators." The report complains that for example, those who attacked a church in Pristina in 2001 have still not been prosecuted, despite the fact that the thieves were recognised and reported to the police.

Protestants are concerned by new plans to introduce religious teaching in schools, fearing that it will be dominated by teaching of Islam and highlight differences with minority faiths. "We believe that the introduction of religion into the school curriculum would lead to segregation of faiths in wider society," the Protestant report declared. "Children would be forced to learn the teachings of religious groups of which they are not part, inevitably those of Islam, in most of the cases."

Despite calls by Chief Imam Sabri Bajgora and the Council of the Islamic Community last April for religious education in schools from this September, backed by a petition reportedly signed by more than 100,000 Pristina residents, Kosovo's government refused to comply. "I do not believe that the government will agree with this even in the future," Hamiti told Forum 18. Yet continuing talk of such religious education makes religious minorities nervous.

The Protestants fear such plans are part of a growing Islamisation of Kosovo sponsored from outside. "We are alarmed that there are now an excess of mosques in proportion to the amount of Muslims that actually attend them, and these mosques are found in central, visible places," the report notes. "These mosques have been built by Islamic groups that are in Kosova as humanitarian organisations and this causes us concern." Local Muslims have already complained that damaged mosques were restored under Arab direction in Saudi undecorated style, in contrast to the decorated style traditional in Kosovo.

Hamiti appears to share these concerns about the activities of some foreign groups, although he did not openly identify specific foreign Muslim charities. "Many government and non-government humanitarian organisations have entered Kosovo with different programmes which were not concentrated only on aid, but beside that have contributed and are still contributing to religious propaganda not compatible with Kosovo society," he told Forum 18. "I'm concerned that if we are not careful to stop the activity of some of these organisations in this moment, tomorrow will be very late and will cause unsolved problems." Hamiti maintained that such organisations included Christian as well as Muslim charities.

Meanwhile, the assistant to Bishop Sopi, the leader of Kosovo's 65,000 Catholics, told Forum 18 their community has no problems. "We have excellent relations with the Muslims and we are favoured by the government," he maintained. He said the Catholics can build new churches – as they are doing in Pristina. He added that they have no programmes of their own on Kosovo television, but their activities are reported in a balanced way. Smaller religious communities – including the Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventists and Hare Krishna devotees – told Forum 18 they have encountered no serious religious liberty problems.

Symptomatic of the lack of attention paid to religious liberty is the failure by two of the major local human rights groups - the Kosovo Helsinki Committee (a member of the Vienna-based International Helsinki Federation) and the Council for the Defence of Human Rights and Freedoms, both based in Pristina - to respond to Forum 18's enquiries. Hamiti maintains that there are no religious freedom problems, only political ones.

But with religion closely tied to ethnicity in Kosovo and a continuing legacy of bitter mutual hatred between Albanians and Serbs, religious freedom continues to suffer in the crossfire - and from the lack of any effort by the international organisations to address the problem.

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