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KOSOVO: Renewed attacks on Serbian Orthodox

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

In the first such incidents since August, Forum 18 News Service has learnt that two Serbian Orthodox churches have been vandalised. As with all such attacks since 1999, when the UN took over administration of the province, no perpetrators have been identified or charged. The NATO-led KFOR, which has overall control of security, claimed to Forum 18 that it had "no knowledge of the alleged events". Despite this, Fr Sava (Janjic), of Decani Monastery, told Forum 18 that the Orthodox Church remains grateful to KFOR troops for their concern and protection, "We do not know what would happen to us without them," but also commented on continuing problems, such as the 10 hours it took to assemble a military escort for priests to travel 15 kilometres to a village to comfort families whose children had been shot, killing and wounding several. Forum 18 has also learnt of numerous Orthodox graveyards being completely destroyed, including in one instance a French military cemetery from the First World War. This war cemetery is now used as a city rubbish dump.

During the last week of November, two Serbian Orthodox churches in Kosovo, in Gornja Brnjica and in Susica (Shushice in Albanian) near Gracanica (Ulpiana), were vandalised, the first attacks on churches since August. The Kosovo Police Service investigated all the reported cases, but no perpetrators have been identified or charged. No perpetrators have ever been arrested for any such attack since the UN and NATO took over the province's administration in 1999.

A spokesman for the NATO-led peacekeeping force KFOR, which has overall control of security in the internationally-governed province, declined any comment on the latest attacks. "We have no knowledge of the alleged events, therefore we cannot comment," Wing Commander Chris Thompson told Forum 18 News Service from Kosovo on 1 December. The Orthodox diocese of Raska and Prizren has expressed its serious concern at this "continuation of vandalism". "We are endangered not only physically, but we are endangered as a religious community battling to preserve its religious and ethnic identity," Fr Sava (Janjic), deputy abbot of Decani Monastery, told Forum 18.

Thompson declined to answer Forum 18's enquiries about why KFOR believed serious attacks on Orthodox sites were resuming after a three-month lull and what steps KFOR was taking to protect such sites.

Fr Miroslav Popadic, the only remaining Serbian Orthodox priest in the Kosovan capital Pristina who is also responsible for the village of Gornja Brnjica 7 kilometres (4 miles) to the north, reported that the little cemetery chapel is a little distance from the village. He told Forum 18 on 29 November that there were no problems with it in the past four and half years since NATO and KFOR have been in Kosovo. "But this time someone entered the belfry via open windows at the top and climbed down the bell rope," he reported. "Some money was stolen and minor material damage was done. After it, the entry doors were smashed and broken, probably in order to exit the chapel." The police visited and completed a report.

A similar attack occurred several days earlier on the St Dimitrije church in Susica, near Gracanica. Unknown persons damaged the churchyard fence and wrote graffiti in Albanian on the church wall. This was the second such attack on the church this year.

"We face more and more difficulties undertaking our regular religious duties," Fr Sava told Forum 18 on 28 November. "It is not only an issue of destruction of churches, monasteries, graveyards and religious monuments." He said the Orthodox Church remains grateful to the KFOR troops for their concern and protection. "We do not know what would happen to us without them."

Fr Sava complained of what he called a "double problem". "Firstly we are mainly unprotected, and vulnerable to any form of physical attack, and secondly, the educational system and a group of quasi historians, without any evidence, are now promoting the thesis that most of the historic Serbian Orthodox monasteries were not built by us, but by the Roman Catholics, and that we are the perpetrators." He said the "historical revisionism" is a growing threat to the Orthodox Church's survival. "We have never claimed that Kosovo is only Serbian, but in Kosovo there are hundreds and hundreds of monuments of collective Serbian history and tradition."

He reported that several restoration projects are now on hold because of the arguments over ownership of historic sites. Fr Sava said the Serbian state is unable to care for historic sites in Kosovo, while the Kosovo ministry of culture, which insists that donations go through their ministry, has "never visited a single Orthodox church". He pointed out that the World Council of Churches is

recommending to the United Nations cultural organisation UNESCO that the Orthodox heritage in Kosovo be included in their list of world cultural heritage sites. "But a major issue is: which country or state will register Kosovo as its territory?"

"But problems are not on the state level," Fr Sava declared. He complained that in the wake of the 14 August shooting of Serbian children swimming in the river in the village of Gorazdevac (Gorazhdec), killing several and badly wounding a dozen, church representatives were unable to reach the village to be with the families for 10 "long hours". "That time was needed to provide us with the necessary military escort to move only 15 kilometres from Decani Monastery, simply to be there when it was critical," he lamented. "That was the place where we were supposed to be. I had to call KFOR generals, to beg and accuse, so that we could get to Gorazdevac."

The last reported attack on church buildings in Kosovo was discovered in September, when Fr Srdjan Milenkovic, parish priest in Orahovac (Rrahovec), visited the 14th century church of St Nedelja in the village of Brnjaca and found that the interior had been desecrated. The Kosovo Police Service conducted an initial investigation and stated that they believe that the incident was at least one month old. "Since the church is no longer under the protection of KFOR and Serbs cannot move freely in that part of the municipality, no-one informed the appropriate Church representatives of the resulting damage," a 24 September statement from the diocese complained.

Various press reports after the Day of the Dead, 1 November, when most Orthodox Serbs in Kosovo visited graveyards, spoke of numerous incidents where graveyards had been desecrated and tombstones destroyed or knocked down. Belgrade daily Politika reported on 2 November that in the past four years more than 50 Serbian Orthodox graveyards were completely destroyed. In some places there is no trace that they ever existed. About 5,000 tombstones were destroyed, and the damage is calculated at millions of euros (dollars).

The Orthodox cemetery in Djakovica (Gjakova) has also been levelled to the ground, and with it a French military cemetery where First World War soldiers are buried. This French war cemetery is now used as a city rubbish dump.

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 (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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