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KOSOVO: Hand Grenade Attack on Orthodox Church

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

Forum 18 News Service has learnt that an Orthodox church in Urosevac has been attacked with a hand grenade, even though it was guarded by Greek troops of the NATO-led KFOR. Since 1999 there have been many such attacks on Orthodox sites, without any arrests being made of perpetrators. Expressing gratitude to the Greek KFOR troops for their protection, the local Orthodox diocese told Forum 18 that "if the Church of St Uros had not been under the constant protection of KFOR, it is likely it would have been destroyed like other Serbian Orthodox churches in the Urosevac and Nerodimlje region."

The Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Raska and Prizren has told Forum 18 News Service that it "most strongly condemns" a grenade attack on the Church of St Uros in the town of Urosevac (Ferizaj in Albanian) in southern Kosovo. At about 8pm on 12 December a hand grenade was thrown into the churchyard, even though the church is protected by Greek troops of the NATO-led KFOR peacekeeping force. No injuries were reported, but one vehicle parked nearby was damaged. The mainly ethnic Albanian Kosovo Police Service has conducted an initial investigation, but thus far without any perpetrators being identified.

The Orthodox diocese points out that from summer 1999, when NATO took over security in the province, there have been similar attacks on the church. "If the Church of St Uros had not been under the constant protection of KFOR," the diocese told Forum 18, "it is likely it would have been destroyed like other Serbian Orthodox churches in the Urosevac and Nerodimlje region."

"The grenade, identified as an Albanian f1 hand grenade, exploded approximately 10 metres from the front steps of the church," KFOR declared in a 13 December statement. "The two KFOR soldiers manning the site witnessed an unidentified male walk by and throw the grenade. The explosion caused no injuries and only minor damage to the guard shack on the site. The church was not damaged."

Orthodox officials are sceptical anyone will ever be arrested for the latest attack. "There has been no further information on this incident," Deacon Srdjan, diocesan secretary, told Forum 18. "What we have to say we have said hundreds of times so far. We do not expect any more news." Since 1999, no-one has been prosecuted for attacks on Serbian Orthodox sites.

The St Uros Church was built in 1933. In June 1999, just after US troops under NATO KFOR command arrived in the area, the church was twice subjected to arson attacks. Since then, it has been under constant KFOR protection. During the past year, KFOR has started handing over protection of Orthodox sites to the Kosovo Police Service, leading to fears that more churches and monasteries will be damaged or destroyed in future. At present, this church and five others which are partially damaged are being protected by Greek KFOR troops, who are also trying to assist the local Serb population in other ways.

Serbian Orthodox representatives visited the Greek soldiers on 15 December to express their gratitude for their continuing help and protection.

For more background information see Forum 18's latest 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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