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KOSOVO & SERBIA: "Do not abandon convent to destruction", bishop pleads

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

Kosovo's Orthodox bishop Artemije (Radosavljevic) has today (19 March) gained a commitment from the KFOR peacekeeping force to defend the Sokolica convent which has been threatened with destruction by Albanian mobs amid the continuing anti-Serb violence, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. He had earlier complained that the Albanian mob first attacks, then waits for KFOR and UNMIK to evacuate the Serbian population or clergy before stepping in to burn and destroy. In devastating criticism of the local political leaders, Council of Europe parliamentary assembly leader Peter Schieder wrote to Kosovo's prime minister Bajram Rexhepi to condemn the violence and "the disgraceful absence of clear and unequivocal condemnation of the anti-Serb violence by the Kosovo Albanian leadership". And he warned: "Kosovo cannot build its future on the blood of innocent people and the ashes of their burned homes and churches."

As more details emerge about the extent of the destruction of Serbian Orthodox churches and sites across Kosovo in anti-Serb violence unleashed on 17 March, the local Orthodox bishop Artemije (Radosavljevic) today (19 March) pleaded with troops from the international KFOR peacekeeping force to defend the convent at Sokolica in northern Kosovo, rather than abandon it to certain destruction. Forum 18 News Service has learnt that KFOR eventually agreed to defend the convent. The bishop had travelled to the Mitrovica KFOR command to issue his appeal after KFOR troops announced to Mother Makarija and the nuns that they have to be ready to evacuate in 30 minutes. "According to Bishop Artemije, a much firmer position on the part of KFOR can be observed today with respect to the protection of churches and monasteries than yesterday and two days ago," the Raska and Prizren diocese told Forum 18 on 19 March.

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After the withdrawal of Danish KFOR troops on 18 March from the vicinity of the Devic Monastery, which had been evacuated a day earlier, an Albanian mob set it on fire, the Information Service of the Serbian Orthodox Church reported. The official UNMIK report from the Mitrovica regional office says that the Danish troops withdrew with the occupants of the monastery to the platoon's base in a farmhouse some distance from the patrimonial site. "It is burnt. Monastery personnel evacuated in time, no injuries reported," UNMIK reported tersely. The diocesan office in Gracanica harshly condemned the destruction of this fifteenth century sacral and cultural monument. The nuns were later taken to the Sokolica convent.

In another case, Italian KFOR general Alberto Primceri explained how a mob had attacked the Serbian monastery in the town of Diesa, home to four elderly nuns. "A crowd of at least 500 Albanians had begun throwing petrol bombs at the monastery," the AFP agency quoted the general as declaring on 19 March. "We had to line up outside and hold them back by firing in the air. They returned later with Kalashnikovs and grenades. This time we responded with fire and wounded some of them. Then we took the four nuns away. The Albanians set the monastery on fire."

The Decani monastery in western Kosovo, home to 30 Serbian Orthodox monks, reported on 19 March that the situation in the nearby town had grown serious, with the presence of several thousand Albanian protestors. The rising tension comes despite promises by the mayor of Decani, Ibrahim Selmonaj, that he would do all he could to lower tensions (see F18News 19 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=282). Italian KFOR has deployed additional forces around the monastery.

Fr Sava (Janjic), deputy abbot of the Decani Monastery, estimated on 19 March that at least twenty churches and monasteries had been destroyed and burned in Kosovo in the previous 48 hours. He told the Belgrade-based Beta news agency that it is very difficult to estimate the volume of the damage since "it is unknown were there any thefts of sacral objects, icons and icon-stands".

Some of the harshest criticism of the Kosovo Albanians and their leadership has come from Peter Schieder, President of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, who has condemned the burning of Serbian homes and churches. "Their acts are disgraceful, but so is the absence of clear and unequivocal condemnation of the anti-Serb violence by the Kosovo Albanian leadership," he wrote on 19 March in an open letter to Kosovo's prime minister, Bajram Rexhepi. "Shifting the blame to the other side, and attempts to exploit

the escalation of ethnic violence to further the political cause of the majority population, are unacceptable. Kosovo cannot build its future on the blood of innocent people and the ashes of their burned homes and churches."

In the Serbian city of Nis, where the Islam-aga mosque was burned in a reprisal attack on 17 March, police chief Radisav Gvozdenovic told journalists on 19 March that the police are to lodge criminal charges against nine people for participating in the arson attack. He confirmed that firefighters had been prevented from approaching the mosque by seven thousand protestors. Meanwhile in Belgrade, where the Bajrakli mosque was seriously damaged by fire, police reported 88 people arrested, but gave no indications of any charges they might face.

The newly appointed Serbian religion minister Milan Radulovic declared on 18 March that the hooligans in Nis and Belgrade "used the situation in Kosovo as a trigger for their brutal attacks on the Islamic religious sites in Serbia". He visited the Bajrakli mosque to express his concern for the fate of the Islamic community.

Borislav Paravac and Sulejman Tihic, members of the Presidency of the Bosnia and Herzegovina, announced on 19 March that they will immediately go to Bugojno in central Bosnia, where the Serbian Orthodox Church of the Holy Mother of God was set alight in the evening of 18 March (see F18News 19 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=282). It is believed that this might be a chain reaction to the burning of churches and mosques the previous night in Kosovo and Serbia.

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.

A printer-friendly map of Bosnia-Herzegovina is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=bosher>

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