

6 May 2004

KOSOVO: Nobody charged for destruction of Orthodox churches and monasteries

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No-one has yet been charged for organising the violence in March, including the destruction of 30 Orthodox churches. Since 1999, no-one responsible for the destruction of 140 churches has been arrested. There is also some evidence that churches were looted for the black market before their destruction. Kosovo's prime ministerial spokesman refused to admit to Forum 18 News Service that any churches were destroyed before March and said it had not been decided who would protect churches from further attacks. The protection provided by KFOR was variable, with the French and German contingents being particularly criticised by the Serbian Orthodox Church. In contrast, other KFOR contingents, such as the Czechs, Italians and Swedes, risked their troops' lives to provide protection. Captain Jonas Bengtsson of the Swedish contingent told Forum 18 that "It is a miracle no Swedish soldier was badly injured," and commented that "Churches have always been one of the most important things to protect." The Swedes have, since the March violence, stepped up protection for churches they are responsible for.

Following the violence in March, "no formal indictment has been raised against any person for the organisation of the pogrom," Fr Sava (Janjic), deputy abbot of the Decani Monastery in western Kosovo, told Forum 18 News Service on 4 May. "Some people had been arrested during the investigation, but it is completely unclear whether they are the real organisers or low rank 'soldiers' who just carried out someone's orders." He complained that no trials have started so far, nor has the public been informed about who is believed to have organised the attacks on Serbs, including the attacks on religious sites. Since 1999, no attackers on any Orthodox Church site have been arrested by the United Nations UNMIK mission, the NATO-led peacekeeping force KFOR, or the mainly ethnic-Albanian Kosovo Police Service (KPS).

Early on 5 May, Forum 18 presented written questions to both KFOR and UNMIK headquarters in Kosovo's capital Pristina asking what arrests have UNMIK, KFOR, or the KPS made of perpetrators of violence and looting against religious sites, and attacks on clergy; whether those arrested were still in custody; what charges they will be tried on and when; what investigations into violence against religious sites and clergy are continuing; what aid UNMIK is giving to rebuild destroyed or damaged religious sites; what protection is now being given to which religious sites and clergy; and who the protection is being given by, and to which religious sites and clergy. Despite promises from both KFOR and UNMIK to respond, neither had done so by the afternoon of 6 May.

In the violence in March, thought by observers including NATO's commander in Southern Europe, Admiral Gregory Johnson, to be pre-planned, ethnic Albanian mobs attacked Serbian homes, churches and schools throughout Kosovo. The attacks took place despite the presence of KFOR and UNMIK, the local KPS, and the KZK (Kosovo Protection Force). The violence left 19 people dead, 250 homes looted and burned, as well as 30 churches and monasteries and several graveyards heavily damaged, looted, burned or destroyed. With the previously destroyed 112 churches and monasteries, this brings the total number destroyed since international forces took over responsibility for Kosovo in 1999 to 140 (see F18News 24 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=286).

Mimoza Kusari, spokesperson for Kosovo's prime minister Bajram Rexhepi, insisted to Forum 18 that all the churches and monasteries destroyed during the March violence will be rebuilt. "As soon as the damage has been assessed they will be restored to the same condition as they were before the violence," she told Forum 18 from Pristina on 6 May. Asked if they will be able to reopen as places of worship she responded: "Of course." She said priests, monks and nuns would return "as soon as the buildings are ready". Asked who would protect them from further attacks she said this has not been decided, though the Kosovo government presumes this will be the international forces.

Kusari admitted that the KPS, KFOR and UNMIK "did not do very well" during the March violence. She said that immediately afterwards the Kosovo government established a 5 million Euro fund from the consolidated budget – "money from Kosovo taxpayers" – to finance the rebuilding of damaged property. "The priority was residential homes." She said damage to historical sites – including Serbian Orthodox churches – is now being assessed by experts from the United Nations cultural organisation UNESCO and the Council of Europe. "UNESCO experts are here at the moment and Council of Europe experts will be here next week."

UNESCO has estimated that 27 million US dollars worth of damage has been done to the 27 churches which can be rebuilt, out of

the 30 destroyed. On 3 May, UNESCO director Koichiro Matsuura stated that the Decani Monastery, which was attacked by mortar fire on 17 March, will be recognised as a UNESCO world heritage site. Although Fr Sava believed such a listing was "significant", he was sceptical about how it would protect the monastery. "In the existing security and political conditions such a decision represents no guarantee," he told Forum 18.

Valbona Boshtrakaj of Kosovo's Culture Ministry said it expected the experts to submit their final report with the assessment of the damage to Serbian historic sites at the end of May. She told Forum 18 from Pristina on 6 May that after that, a budget would be allocated to pay for restoration. She claimed that her ministry had invited the Serbian Orthodox diocese to cooperate but "they are not willing to have contact with the institutions of the provisional self-government". However, she said Albanian and Serbian experts were working jointly with UNESCO experts on the field assessments of the damage to Serbian sites.

Although prime-ministerial spokesperson Kusari admitted that some 30 Serbian Orthodox churches had been destroyed or damaged during the March violence, she refused to admit that more than 100 Serbian Orthodox holy sites had been destroyed or damaged since international forces took control of Kosovo in 1999. "You must have mistaken information," she told Forum 18. "Churches were under special protection – nothing happened to them before March."

Arguments have persisted about whether and how KFOR and the other security agencies should and could have done more to protect Serbs and Serbian-owned property, including Orthodox sites. The Serbian Orthodox diocese has complained of what it regards as the failure particularly of KFOR troops from Germany and France.

One German KFOR officer of the Multinational Brigade Southwest said that KFOR is still investigating their failure to protect the destroyed and damaged Orthodox sites in the town in March. "I can't say why we failed to protect them," he told Forum 18 from Prizren in southern Kosovo on 6 May. "We are still looking for the reasons." He said he did not know when the investigation would be complete and whether the findings would be published. Asked about Serbian Orthodox claims that German KFOR troops did not do as much to protect Serbian lives and property as troops from other national contingents, the officer referred all enquiries to the German defence ministry in Berlin.

The German KFOR officer said that all Serbian Orthodox churches in the southwest brigade area are now protected by fixed posts and by mobile patrols.

However, other KFOR contingents risked their troops' lives to defend Serbs in March. "It was very dangerous for us," Captain Jonas Bengtsson of the Swedish contingent, based in the village of Ajvalija near Pristina, told Forum 18 on 6 May. "It is a miracle no Swedish soldier was badly injured." He said the thirteenth-century Gračanica monastery and the church in the village of Laplje Selo survived only because "we kept the Albanians out". "In my personal opinion, if we had failed to keep the Albanians out these churches would have been burnt to the ground. I'm sure the Albanians wanted to do this." He described these two sites as "big symbols" for the local Serbs. "Churches have always been one of the most important things to protect."

Captain Bengtsson told Forum 18 that his contingent had stepped up its protection for the two churches since the March violence, with fixed posts outside both. He said his contingent also had responsibility for two churches in Pristina. "St Nicholas' Church was burnt out during the March attacks, the other is unfinished and not functioning, so we assess the threat as not too high."

However, he declined to say why KFOR had failed to protect churches adequately in the March violence. "I can't answer this – it is for a higher political level to comment," he told Forum 18.

A recent visitor to the Patriarchate of Pec (Peja) in western Kosovo, which was guarded during the March violence by Italian KFOR troops, told Forum 18 that it "probably survived the March attacks only because the nuns refused to leave and said they would burn with their church if it came to that."

One Czech KFOR officer who took part in defending St Andreas Church in the town of Podujevo in northern Kosovo during the unrest has described the assault. "We were defending a Serb Orthodox church against a mob of 500 Albanians, but there were too many for us," Captain Jindrich Plescher told the Prague Post. "When they broke through the wall [around the church], we got orders to retreat. They smashed everything inside, including our communications centre, made a big pile in front and set it on fire. Then they turned their attention to the adjacent Serb cemetery. They knocked over tombstones, dug up the coffins and scattered the bones in them."

Fr Sava complained to Forum 18 of the "complete insecurity" facing Kosovo's Serbs today. "The unreadiness of KFOR troops at several locations to protect Orthodox churches and monasteries, especially in the German and French sectors where huge damage has been done, raised serious concerns and doubts about whether KFOR will provide any protection at all to other sites with Orthodox Christian monuments, or whether they will be left for destruction." He said the Church has asked KFOR to bring in more troops and to take wider authority to protect not only the Serbian population, but its sanctuaries also.

As well as the destruction of frescoes, icons and other church property, Fr Sava is worried about the black market in stolen church goods. "Since 1999, more than 10,000 icons and other church vessels were destroyed or stolen for the purpose of selling them on the

black market." Many valuable books and treasures have been lost and, because the movement of Orthodox clergy has been restricted and no remains have been found of items such as metal filigree crosses and other vessels, the Orthodox fear that churches were first looted for the black market and then burned down or otherwise destroyed. The KPS has arrested several local Albanians who tried to sell church treasures on the black market.

The Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Raska and Prizren has released (below) a list, checked as accurately as possible, of the 30 religious sites damaged or destroyed in March.

Prizren:

1. Ljeviska, Holy Mother of God, completed 14th century. Burned from inside, heavy damage to frescoes from 12-14th centuries.
2. Church of Christ the Saviour – 14th century. Burned.
3. Cathedral Church of St George the Martyr (1856). Burned and dynamited.
4. Church of St Nicholas (14 century). Burned from inside.
5. Church of St George (16th century). Burned from inside.
6. Church of Holy Sunday (14th century, later reconstructed). Burned down.
7. Church of St Panteleymon (14th century, later reconstructed). Burned down.
8. Church of Ss. Kozma and Damian (14th century, later reconstructed). Burned down.
9. Church of Holy Sunday in Zivinjane, near Prizren. Dynamited.
10. Monastery of the Holy Archangels (14th century). Looted and burned in the presence of German KFOR soldiers.

Also: Orthodox Theological College. Burned down.

Also: Bishop's residence in Prizren and a Deacon's house. Both burned down.

Orahovac (Rrahovec):

11. Church of Holy Sunday (1852), in Brnjaca. Set on fire and destroyed, along with a parish home.

Djakovica (Gjakova):

12. Church of the Resurrection of the Most Holy Mother of God (16-19th century). Burned down, with the old and new parish homes, later levelled to the ground.
13. Church of St. Lazarus, in Piskote. Damaged in 1999, in 2004 completely razed together with a nearby graveyard.
14. Church of St. Elijah, near Bistrazin. Damaged in 1999, in 2004 destroyed.

Also: two belfries of the Cathedral Church of the Holy Trinity that survived the initial destruction in 1999, in 2004 razed to the ground. Since March 2004, the local population have completely removed all the building remains using lorries, and the municipality has opened a public park at the site.

Srbica (Skenderaj):

15. Devic Monastery (15th century). Burned to the ground, and graves of saints opened up. Alongside the monastery, 20 adjoining buildings have been looted and burned.

Pec (Peja):

16. Church of St. John the Baptist (Metropolitan seat with parish home and apartments). Burned, but the walls are still standing.
17. Church of Most Holy Mother of God, in Belo Polje. Burned in 1999, renovated in late 2003, set on fire in March 2004, but lightly damaged.

Urosevac (Ferizaj):

18. Cathedral Church of King Uros. Three hand grenades thrown at the church, which was set on fire. 19 KFOR and UNMIK troops were wounded attempting to protect the church severely. The structure is still standing, under KFOR & UNMIK protection. The city graveyard was severely damaged.
19. Church of St. Elijah, in Nekodim. Destroyed along with a graveyard after KFOR troops left.
20. Church of Ss. Peter and Paul, in Talinovci. Set on fire and a local graveyard destroyed.
21. Church of the Most Holy Mother of God, in Sovtovic. Destroyed with a local graveyard.

Kamenica (Kamenice):

22. Church in Donja Slapasnica. Stoned and broken into.

Stimlje (Shtime):

23. Church of St. Archangel Michael (1920). Set on fire, but it remains standing.

Pristina:

24. Church of St. Nicholas (early 19th century). Burned down along with a parish home, many icons, and a large historical church archive.

Kosovo Polje (Fushe Kosove):

25. Church of St. Nicholas (1940). Burned and desecrated, but still standing.
26. Church of St. Catherine, in Bresje. Looted and desecrated.

Vucitrn (Vushtrri):

27. Church of St. Elijah, (19th century). Looted and partially destroyed in 1999, in 2004 completely burned down. Also destroyed was a local parish home and a graveyard.

Obilic (Obiliq):

28. Church of St. Michael, newly built. Set on fire with car tires, still standing but severely damaged due to the high temperature of

the fire.

Kosovska Mitrovica (Mitrovica):

29. Church of St Sava, in the southern part of town. Set on fire twice. Photos show the fire brigade extinguishing fire in neighbouring houses, but not in the church. Parish home also burned down.

Podujevo (Podujeve):

30. Church of St Andreas, (1929). Initially defended by Czech KFOR troops who were overwhelmed by the numbers of the attacking mob. Church and graveyard now destroyed. Belfry dynamited, as well as a church yard wall. Graves dug out and bones scattered in neighbouring fields.

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.

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