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COMMENTARY: Kosovo - What now?

By a KFOR military chaplain

The KFOR peace-keeping force needs to defend the Serbian population and its Orthodox churches more effectively, a military chaplain, who prefers not to be identified, argues from personal experience of the violence in Kosovo in this personal commentary for Forum 18 News Service <http://www.forum18.org>. The chaplain believes that international organisations naively did not understand the minds of the people of the region – and so did not understand what was necessary to provide religious freedom. The international community needs to state clearly that independence will not be granted until minorities have full rights and security. The big challenge is changing people's mentality before independence can be considered – and this requires a long-term commitment to genuine peace and genuine justice from both Albanian politicians and the international community.

During the upsurge in anti-Serb violence in March, I stood on a hillside south of Kosovo's regional capital Pristina and for 360 degrees all around fires were burning. The violence was well-organised. I knew it was not just houses that were burning, but schools and churches. I drove across Kosovo afterwards and saw the terrible aftermath. In the southern town of Prizren signs were still visible "Protected building – any damage will be prosecuted". But the signs had done nothing to prevent the churches and monasteries from being reduced to blackened ruins.

As a Christian priest, eight months after the violence, I still find it hard to find words to describe seeing with my own eyes the burnt-out churches, monasteries and homes – and even a hospital. It was a terrible, evil act. The Serbs have totally fled from Prizren. Everything they had there has been burnt. In the western town of Pec, some of the churches were attacked but are still standing.

I think back to before the violence, to the churches that were so rich, where God was worshipped through the centuries. The people had put so much into their places of worship. It was a great, even fantastic experience to visit them. Now many have been burnt out in acts of sacrilege. I saw holes cut in holy images, icons slashed across with knives. In one church a blackened chain hung from the ceiling where once a chandelier had lit the sanctuary. Even the doors were destroyed.

Individual soldiers within the NATO-led KFOR peacekeeping force were outraged, angry not only at the violence against the buildings but against the people. They told me it was hard to respect the Albanians after what they had done. They try to be neutral, but say it is difficult now.

Some of the KFOR forces did well – even at risk to themselves and their lives. But others did not, simply running away and letting the mobs burn down what they wanted. They could and should have done more.

The widely divergent responses of different national contingents is well-known and has already been debated within KFOR. But the reasons for the different reactions are clear: some were better equipped and trained than others, and had a clearer mandate from their politicians. The Germans were in such internal disarray that they just hid in their camp, which provoked a terrible row in Germany. One other national contingent I observed just packed up their gear and ran. Some nations simply had soldiers who were not prepared to fight (see F18News 6 May 2004

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=314).

KFOR national contingents were already well-known as being either "Serb-friendly" or "Serb hostile" even before the March attacks. Although some members of other KFOR contingents accused their colleagues of being "Serb-friendly", it was the latter who understood the situation correctly. They understood that - in contrast to 1999 when the Albanians needed defending - the boot was on the other foot and the Serbs were now the ones who needed defending. Yet some nations' soldiers failed to recognise this.

Even abandoned and disused Orthodox churches were attacked. Pristina's unfinished Serbian Orthodox cathedral, which had been surrounded by barbed wire, was attacked again after the German KFOR troops guarding it fled. Only the blackened walls still survive (see F18News 24 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=286).

I do not think that every Albanian wanted to burn down everything Serb, but many of them want the Serbs to leave. They are also intent on removing all traces of any Serb presence. Churches are important symbols and historical monuments – they show that the

Serbs have been in Kosovo a long time. Some Albanians intended to show that KFOR cannot defend Kosovo's Serbs and wanted to take the opportunity to get rid of the churches as symbols. They wished to show that Serbs have no future in Kosovo.

While shadowy Albanian leaders planned, organised and executed the violence, many Albanians were eager to participate. Local Albanian police were not neutral: many helped the attackers by showing them the best route to take. This has made it all but impossible for Serbian police officers to trust and work together with their supposed Albanian colleagues.

Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries were the targets, not Christian churches per se. In Prizren I saw the churches, bishop's residence, monasteries and Serbian houses burnt out, but the Albanian Catholic church was untouched.

Although Albanian attacks on Serbs are motivated by ethnic hatred, religion is an important element – even if the Albanians are generally not very devout Muslims. The Serbs have seen their possibility to worship taken from them as churches and monasteries have been destroyed and it is too dangerous for them to move freely around Kosovo. They face obstacles to worshipping God. Going to church is dangerous.

Perhaps the international organisations now ruling Kosovo – KFOR, the United Nations administration UNMIK and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) – understand what religious freedom is, but they have been naive to believe they could build bridges between the two communities. They thought they could heal the wounds in a short time, but failed to appreciate how people in this region carry history. They did not understand minds – and therefore what was necessary to provide religious freedom.

However difficult, KFOR has to protect priests, monks and nuns. To do this they will need many more soldiers than they have today. They will have to be everywhere.

KFOR needs to be redeployed. Originally deployed in Albanian areas to protect the Albanians, its camps are still mainly in Albanian areas. Now it has to relocate to the Serbian areas to protect the Serbs, as today it is they who need protection. Providing such protection is a big challenge and, to be honest, I do not think it is possible. I think the Serbs will be squeezed out of Kosovo, except perhaps for one or two strongholds. To maintain any significant Serbian presence would need far more foreign soldiers.

I saw no Kosovo Albanian politicians able or willing to give such protection. It was disappointing to find no Albanians prepared to condemn the March violence and to admit it was wrong. No-one would take a clear stand. Even Albanians who were thoughtful and reflective failed to speak out. The Kosovo Albanian government did immediately pledge to support the rebuilding of churches with money, but I am sceptical. Maybe a handful of churches might be rebuilt, but in any event there will be no Serbs left to worship in them.

I cannot see that Kosovo will soon be independent as the Albanians hope and expect. The March riots - which left 30 churches and monasteries destroyed, 19 people dead and 250 homes looted and burned - proved that they are not mature enough to be a sovereign nation. They showed the international community that if it leaves Kosovo the province would at once descend into persecution of the Serbs and bloodshed. Houses and churches would be burnt and the people killed. It is not yet time for independence. I believe the international community understands this. To become an independent nation the Kosovo Albanians would have to guarantee minority rights.

The fear remains though that despite continuing concerns over the security situation in Kosovo, countries contributing troops might need forces elsewhere in the world and no longer be willing to use their time, money and human resources to protect Kosovo's Serbs and other minorities.

For its part the Serbian Orthodox Church was not active enough in the 1990s in condemning government actions – even massacres – against Albanians. This was despite the lead of Bishop Artemije of Raska and Prizren and the "cybermonk", Fr Sava of the monastery at Decani in western Kosovo, who were very vocal in criticising the policies of Slobodan Milosevic. This was not just a matter of words. The Decani monks, who are now under almost constant siege, sheltered many Albanians fleeing for their lives from Serb paramilitary units in April 1999.

However, there were also church figures who acted more as Serbs than as Christians. Such a failure could have stemmed from the pressure the Orthodox Church had been under in Kosovo from the majority Albanian population, or from the strong link between the Orthodox Church and the nation. The Serbian Orthodox Church is a national and a nationalistic Church, thereby creating the danger that when crimes are committed in the name of the nation it does not take a clear stand against them.

Had the Church with one voice spoken up forcefully in the 1990s, perhaps the Albanians would have remembered that now. Even had the Albanians still gone ahead with their attacks over the past five years, including the March 2004 attacks, as a united Christian Church the Orthodox would have done what was right.

It is hard for the Orthodox Church to do anything now to protect its shrines. It could try to develop dialogue with those in charge of Kosovo today, urging them to guarantee religious freedom and freedom of movement. Although I believe it should not leave

anything untried, I am afraid this will not lead to much.

Some in the Serbian government are now mulling over the idea of partitioning Kosovo. I am not sure how good a solution this would be. Serbs are scattered across Kosovo and creating a safe haven for them in northern Kosovo might mean giving up other places which are important for the people living there and for the Church, such as Pec, the historic home of the Orthodox Patriarchate. Such a plan would provide some security, but so many Serbs would have to move. The international community would have to build houses for those moved from their homes.

If the Serbs abandoned certain areas of Kosovo their churches would not last long – months at the most. Unprotected churches would be quickly demolished.

No common Christian sentiment exists between the Serbian Orthodox and the Christian Albanian minority, most of whom are Catholics, but with Protestants too. I saw no contacts between Serbian and Albanian Christians. (In the areas I was in, I did not meet any Protestants.) Maybe the Catholic Church could have done more as Orthodox churches were destroyed after 1999 and especially in the March violence. The Catholic Albanians might have been a group that could have been used to communicate to the rest of Kosovo's Albanians, though I do not know if this would have worked. I do not believe the local Catholic Albanians acted any differently to other Albanians during the attacks (during the war in Bosnia we saw Catholic Croats fighting Orthodox Serbs).

Although numerous mosques have been built in Kosovo since 1999 – many with Arab money – Albanians told me they cared little about them. They told me they needed other things first. Only old people go to the mosques and many are empty.

Changing people's mentality is the big challenge. The international bodies in Kosovo – UNMIK, KFOR and the OSCE – as well as the international community more widely need to tell the Albanian public that independence will not be granted until minorities have full rights and security. This is one lever of pressure they have.

KFOR must focus more on protecting the Serbs, their churches and other buildings, and ensure freedom of movement. Some churches are not in villages and for Serbs to enjoy their religious freedom they need protection to visit such churches.

Attackers have been able to act with impunity, but this must stop. Those who organised the March violence – and earlier attacks – must be prosecuted. The authorities know who they are - KFOR intelligence knew many of those who organised the violence - but the difficulty has always been to provide proof that will stand up in court. If cases go to court and then collapse because proof is not strong enough that will make the situation worse. Witnesses brave enough to come forward will see that nothing happens and would be vulnerable, despite a witness protection programme (see F18News 6 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=314).

Photographs are held of those actually committing the violence, but prosecuting them would not catch the big fish, the organisers who are often prominent figures in Kosovo Albanian society.

Albanian politicians need to provide money to rebuild Orthodox churches, as well as houses, schools and other facilities for the Serbian population. They need to work to provide security to the Serbs and freedom of movement. Their president, Ibrahim Rugova, and other leaders need to spell out unequivocally that the March violence against the Serbs was wrong and condemn what happened. Continuing attacks and murders of Serbs must stop. Maybe financial pressure on the Albanian-led government might help, but the greatest pressure is to withhold independence.

As a Christian priest, I believe Christians around the world should put pressure on local religious leaders - whether Muslim, Orthodox or Catholic - to behave in accordance with the dictates of their faith, though I am not sure how much this will achieve. Violence cannot be defended by any religious view. Christians too can pray. They can also travel to Kosovo to help in reconciliation, though such a commitment needs to be long-term: short-term flying visits will achieve little.

It will be impossible for the international bodies to leave Kosovo soon – restoring peace and justice to Kosovo is a long-term commitment. Changing the mentality of the inhabitants is a crucial task in this, though it will take a very long time.

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Commentaries are personal views and do not necessarily represent the views of F18News or Forum 18.

For the physical consequences of the March violence in Kosovo, see F18News 6 May 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=314 . For reports of the violence at the time, including related violence in Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia, see F18News 18 March http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=280 , 19 March http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=282 and 19 March http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=283 and 24 March 2004

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=286 .

For more background information, see Forum 18's 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 KFOR military chaplain , contributed this comment to Forum 18 News Service. Commentaries are personal views and do not necessarily represent the views of F18News or Forum 18.

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