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MACEDONIA: Orthodox Archbishop jailed – without the Gospels

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

The head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia, Archbishop Jovan (Vranisskovski) of Ohrid and Skopje, has now been jailed for 18 months on charges of "inciting national, racial and religious hatred, schism and intolerance". Jovan's colleague, Bishop Marko of Dremvica and Bitola, told Forum 18 News Service that, as well as keeping Jovan under constant surveillance, police forced him to change out of his cassock and refused to allow him to take anything with him into prison. "The archbishop was not permitted to take his prayer book, the Gospels, an icon or any of the insignia of his rank with him," Bishop Marko told Forum 18. During the first 30 days of his jail term, Jovan is not being allowed visits from anyone, apart from his lawyer and his immediate family, who are only being allowed to visit him once, for five minutes only. After the initial 30 days he will be either be sent to a maximum security prison unit, or to a unit with less strict discipline.

The head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia, Archbishop Jovan (Vranisskovski) of Ohrid and Skopje, was taken to Idrizovo prison in Macedonia's capital Skopje on 26 July, to begin an 18 month jail sentence, imposed in 2004, on charges of "inciting national, racial and religious hatred, schism and intolerance". Jovan's colleague Bishop Marko of Dremvica and Bitola complained of the way police took Jovan to jail, seizing him from his car in Skopje, forcing him to change out of his cassock and refusing to allow him to take anything with him into prison. "The archbishop was not permitted to take his prayer book, the Gospels, an icon or any of the insignia of his rank with him," Bishop Marko told Forum 18 News Service from Bitola in southern Macedonia on 27 July. Archbishop Jovan was not permitted to speak to the press assembled in front of the prison.

During the next 30 days, Jovan is not being allowed visits from anyone, apart from his lawyer and his immediate family. His family are only being allowed to visit him once, for five minutes only. After the initial 30 days he will be relocated within the prison, either to a maximum security unit or to a unit with less strict discipline.

Metropolitan Jovan's sentence came into force after the Appeal Court, in his home town of Bitola, rejected his request for his 18 month prison sentence to be delayed until the Supreme Court rules on his appeal. Jovan's appeal to the Supreme Court could last for up to a year (see F18News 24 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=593). Jovan will then be entitled to appeal to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, and told Forum 18 that "I may sit in jail and cannot make my case abroad until I completely finish with all the domestic courts. This is why my hearing before the Supreme Court is being delayed for so long."

An order was issued on 25 July for Jovan to report the following day not to the local Bitola prison, but to Idrizovo prison, for no apparent reason. Bishop Marko told Forum 18 that when he and Jovan drove from Bitola to Skopje on 26 July, they were escorted by a police car for the whole journey and that "several times we were stopped by police and our car searched, and our documents checked, and rechecked."

"When we arrived in the suburbs of Skopje, we were finally stopped by another patrol, and told to wait until further notice. Then, after an hour, about 10 police squad cars appeared, surrounded us, and they pulled the Archbishop out of the car and put him in a police car," Bishop Marko complained. "They said that he would be driven to a police station nearby and that we will receive all other information there. Upon our arrival, we were told that he was in jail, after he was forced to change his clothes. The police then told us that Archbishop Jovan was late and that an arrest warrant was issued for him. This is ridiculous, since his passport was taken ten days ago, and our monastery was under non-stop police surveillance the whole time."

Jovan has previously been jailed in 2003, when he was given five days' solitary confinement for baptising his sister's grandchild (see F18News 24 July 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=113). Subsequently, on 31 October 2003, he was given a 12-month sentence, suspended for two years, for performing the baptism in a church building belonging to the rival Macedonian Orthodox Church, which was deemed to be violent entry into Macedonian Church property (see F18News 13 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=228).

Archbishop Jovan told Forum 18 that "I did not offend against the law in any way. But, the government can also activate the suspended sentence if facts not previously known to judges are found. They activated the sentence because they claim that they did not know that I was the Serbian Orthodox Exarch (protector) of the Ohrid Archbishopric! This is absurd, since the previous sentence

is accusing me of exactly that on two pages. They are trying to sentence me twice for the same act."

The state is also pursuing two more criminal investigations against Archbishop Jovan, both for alleged fraud and mismanagement of funds while he was serving as a bishop of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. All the trials and charges were launched when Jovan left the Macedonian Orthodox Church and transferred to the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The roots of the dispute between the Serbian and Macedonian Churches lie in the creation of the Macedonian Church in 1958 under heavy pressure from the then-communist government of Marshal Tito. In 1968 the Macedonian Church proclaimed its autocephaly (complete independence) from the Serbian Orthodox Church, but no other canonical Orthodox Church in the world recognises this autocephaly.

During a long-running campaign against the Serbian Orthodox Church the government has, among other things, repeatedly refused to give state registration to the Serbian Orthodox Church (see F18News 4 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=505), staged police raids with priests of the rival Macedonian Orthodox Church to "persuade" members of the Serbian Church in Macedonia to join the Macedonian Church (see F18News 9 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=506), and demolished a monastery (see Forum18 News 21 October 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=437) after a paramilitary "state security unit" attacked it with machine guns (see F18News 24 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=259).

A printer-friendly map of Macedonia is available from

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

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