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MACEDONIA: Serbian bishop remains in prison as appeal fails

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

Despite appeals from politicians and Christian leaders around the world, on 16 September Macedonia's Supreme Court upheld the 18-month prison sentence on the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia, Archbishop Jovan. "The Macedonian state is doing everything to make him stay in prison as long as possible," his colleague Bishop Marko complained to Forum 18 News Service. "They are discriminating against him, that is obvious, and also against all of us in Macedonia, their own citizens." Archbishop Jovan has been denied visits in prison from his church colleagues and denied access to religious services. On 19 September he was taken to Veles as prosecutors try for the third time to convict him of embezzlement, a charge he denies. The Macedonian Helsinki Committee has condemned those who call for "intolerance and hatred" against Serbian Orthodox in the country.

On 16 September Macedonia's Supreme Court acquitted Archbishop Jovan (Vranisskovski) of Ohrid, the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia, of two minor charges, but confirmed another two, thereby upholding the 18 month jail sentence which he began serving on 26 July. "Senior political and religious leaders around the world asked the government to reconsider jailing a bishop for his religious beliefs," his colleague Bishop Marko (Kimev) of Dremvica and Bitola told Forum 18 News Service on 19 September, "but the Macedonian government is deaf and blind - to its own detriment, I believe." Among those appealing for Jovan's release were the heads of the Ecumenical and Russian Orthodox Patriarchates, the Orthodox Churches of Greece and America and the Catholic European Bishop's Conference, as well as Serbia's prime minister Vojislav Kostunica.

Bishop Marko complains of the isolation Archbishop Jovan has been held in at the Idrizovo prison in Skopje, although he has recently been transferred to a less strict section of the prison. "They do not permit us to visit our shepherd - the police prevented us from visiting him on 28 August, the feast day of the Dormition of the Mother of God, when we wanted to bring him the sacraments. He is allowed no religious service in prison, and no visits are permitted except from his parents."

Archbishop Jovan - who transferred from the jurisdiction of the Macedonian Orthodox to the Serbian Orthodox Church in 2002 - was sentenced in August 2004 by the court in the southern town of Bitola on charges of inciting national and religious hatred, though he did not begin serving the sentence for nearly a year as appeals dragged on (see F18News 27 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=618).

The sentence came at the time of a series of government attacks on Serbian Orthodox places of worship in Macedonia, while the head of the government's committee for relations with religious communities, Cane Mojanovski, told Forum 18 that the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia "will never get registration" (see F18News 23 September 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=418).

Bishop Marko told Forum 18 that the Supreme Court partially accepted Jovan's appeal, acquitting him of charges of holding a religious service in his father's apartment and for being present at the consecration of his two bishops in Serbia in 2003. "But the court confirmed that he is inciting national and religious hatred by accepting to become exarch of the Ohrid Archbishopric, and for having church calendars (small booklets with holy dates, prayers and saints' pictures) at his church services when he was arrested."

Because the Supreme Court did not acquit Archbishop Jovan of all charges, his punishment is "within the framework of the punishment foreseen by the law", the Court statement said. Jovan's lawyer, Vasko Georgiev, told the press on 16 September that the possibility remains to petition the Supreme Court for an extraordinary sentence reduction. He said Jovan's case will go to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg after all the domestic legal remedies are exhausted.

Bishop Marko declined to say if Archbishop Jovan will appeal for a pardon. "Whether to ask for a pardon is a decision for the Archbishop himself, but we will go to Strasbourg for sure. The Macedonian state is doing everything to make him stay in prison as long as possible. They are discriminating against him, that is obvious, and also against all of us in Macedonia, their own citizens. The government is frightening people - the burden of fear is too heavy."

Meanwhile, on 19 September, Archbishop Jovan was taken from prison in Skopje to the court in the town of Veles south-east of Skopje for a third trial on charges of embezzling 57,000 Euros (442,826 Norwegian kroner or 69,239 US dollars) donated for the

repair of the Church of St Pantelejmon in Veles while he was still a bishop of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. In two previous instances, Jovan was acquitted of the charges by the same court, but at the public prosecutor's third appeal to the Appeal Court, the case was returned to Veles for a new trial.

At the 19 September hearing, Jovan again rejected the accusations, telling the court that the case was a "set-up". His lawyers requested that the hearing be adjourned until copies of the original documentation are provided by the Macedonian Orthodox Church. The judge agreed to this.

"While he was still serving as the local bishop, the Church was not permitted to hold foreign currency. So the cashier put the funds in the bank under his name," Sister Olimpijada of the Ohrid Archbishopric told Forum 18 on 19 September after attending the hearing in Veles earlier in the day. She said that when the allegations were published, the cashier took the money and deposited it in the court, explaining what he had done and why.

"The archbishop is looking good," Sister Olimpijada reported. "We saw him today in the court room, but were able to speak with him only for a brief period. He was under police escort all the time. He encouraged us, and gave us a blessing."

The Macedonian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights has questioned the government's moves against members of the Serbian Orthodox Church. "Human rights can be implemented only in a society in which the law applies equally to all," it declared on 5 September, "and in which people are aware that threatening the rights of others opens the door for limitations of their own rights." The Helsinki Committee asked why no one instituted a procedure "against priests and individuals who in the name of their own religious conviction and respect for a religious hierarchy (the Macedonian Orthodox Church) call for intolerance and hatred, threaten the lives and security of others that hold different views and convictions and respect another religious hierarchy".

The Ohrid Archbishopric warned on 16 September that all the "terror and religious discrimination of the Macedonian authorities against Archbishop Jovan and other members of the Ohrid Archbishopric" will be reported to "relevant international institutions". It said it will also pass on details of what it calls "documented cases of hate speech" from representatives of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, and from some politicians and journalists.

"Although we face state-sponsored persecution, the church is functioning well," adds Bishop Marko. "Life goes on, albeit we serve in medieval conditions - in the catacombs, people's homes and houses. We are greatly encouraged by the prayers of many Christian leaders around the world, but we feel as though we are living in the bad times we thought were behind us."

A printer-friendly map of Macedonia is available from
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=macedo>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY