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MACEDONIA: Trials without end for Serbian Orthodox?

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

Just days after being handed an extra two years in prison for "embezzlement" for holding church funds in a private bank account for two days three years ago - bringing his total prison term to four and a half years - the fourth trial for Archbishop Jovan, head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia, began in Veles on 29 September. "It is ridiculous that I am accused of embezzling the funds that I spent on the life and work of my diocese," Archbishop Jovan told Forum 18 News Service before his recent imprisonment. Eleven church members who attended a service he conducted in a private flat in January 2004 now face court summonses. Goran Pavlovski, spokesperson for the cabinet of ministers, refused to explain to Forum 18 why his government is so hostile to Macedonian parishes of the Serbian Orthodox Church and declined to say if Macedonian citizens are allowed to belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church. It has called its followers to a week of fasting in response to the third sentence in a row against Archbishop Jovan.

In the wake of the additional two year sentence on Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid, head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia, handed down on 23 September and a further trial begun today (29 September), as well as summonses to eleven participants in a Serbian Orthodox service held in a private flat, Macedonian government officials have refused to explain to Forum 18 News Service why the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia has been denied registration, why its communities have been attacked and why Macedonian citizens cannot belong to the faith of their choice. Goran Pavlovski, spokesperson for the cabinet of ministers, refused to explain why his government is so hostile to Macedonian parishes of the Serbian Orthodox Church. He insisted that the Church is not recognised in Macedonia, but refused to respond when Forum 18 observed that this was because the government has repeatedly rejected its registration applications. He repeatedly and pointedly declined to say whether Macedonian citizens are allowed to belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church or not.

On the case of Archbishop Jovan, whom he referred to by his secular name Zoran Vranisskovski, Pavlovski insisted that he has merely been punished for his crimes. "You think you know very much about this case, but you know very little," he told Forum 18 from the capital Skopje on 29 September. "Mr Vranisskovski committed a crime with money and that's why he's in jail." He declined to say what information he believes Forum 18 is unaware of.

Borce Pesesvski, spokesperson for the interior ministry, also maintained that "Mr Vranisskovski" has been punished for fraud he committed when he was a bishop of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and referred all enquiries to the Justice Ministry. He declined to discuss why his ministry has played a part in suppressing the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia, including by attacking and demolishing places of worship.

Likewise Tomislav Dopuzovski of the government's Committee for Relations with Religious Communities refused to explain the official determination to crush the Church's activity. "We do not have the Serbian Orthodox Church here," he told Forum 18 from Skopje on 29 September. Told that the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia had applied to his committee for registration and been refused, he declined all further discussion.

The prosecution of Archbishop Jovan at the court in the town of Veles south east of Skopje came on the prosecutors' third attempt after two earlier attempts failed. On 23 September the court found him guilty of embezzling 57,180 Euros (448,541 Norwegian kroner or 68,725 US dollars) donated for church reconstruction when he was a bishop of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. In the same case, his former clerk Toni Petrusevski was also found guilty and sentenced to fifteen months in prison.

Archbishop Jovan's two year sentence will be in addition to the sentences he has already received (see F18News 20 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=655). As he is already serving a combined sentence of two and a half years from two earlier trials, this new sentence will now require him to stay in Idrizovo prison in Skopje for a total of four and a half years.

The Serbian Church in Macedonia has dismissed the case as a "set-up". It pointed out on 24 September that the two defendants were sentenced for holding the money for two days between the time it was withdrawn from a private account to the moment it was deposited with the court in Veles in November 2002. At the time the money was in a private account, no religious organisation was permitted to hold a bank account with foreign currency. The Church has called its followers in Macedonia to one week of fasting, from 26 September to 2 October, in response to Archbishop Jovan's third sentence in a row.

"What was shocking at this trial," abbot David (Ninov) of the Monastery of the Dormition of the Mother of God told Forum 18 from Skopje on 29 September, "was that the same court which acquitted our bishop twice, and the same judge who judged the second of these trials - without any new evidence and merely at the request of the Appeal court to repeat the trial, and this for the third time - now finds Jovan guilty, sentencing him to two years in jail as a criminal. We, who seek only a democratic trial, honouring the facts and respecting human and religious rights, find this incomprehensible." He claimed Archbishop Jovan's human, constitutional and internationally-guaranteed rights have been violated.

On 29 September, the court in Veles began a new, fourth trial against Archbishop Jovan on charges of embezzling 600,000 Euros (4,706,150 Norwegian kroner or 721,104 US dollars) from church funds, also while he was still serving as a bishop of the Macedonian Orthodox Church in Veles. His lawyer, Vasil Georgiev, told the Belgrade daily Danas on 28 September that Archbishop Jovan is being accused of embezzling "all that his diocese spent during seven years of his service, for all the salaries, bills, material costs, purchases, and other expenses, for all priests, clerks, churches, monasteries, petrol, etc."

Archbishop Jovan rejects all the new accusations. In his last interview to Forum 18 before being sent to prison in July, he complained that attempts are underway to put him on trial "for all the expenses since the days of Adam". "It is ridiculous that I am accused of embezzling the funds that I spent on the life and work of my diocese."

Sister Olimpijada of the Ohrid Archbishopric reported that she was among 70 church members denied access to the Veles courtroom today, although the trial was billed as "open". "We complained to the president of the court, who ordered that our two bishops and one monk should be permitted to enter the courtroom," she told Forum 18 from Veles on 29 September. "Previously, the judge permitted only members of the schismatic Macedonian Orthodox Church to enter, and some journalists, but not us. But, when the presiding judge saw it, he ordered the court police to remove our bishops, but since they had permission from the higher authority, the judge cancelled the proceedings and set a new date." She said the proceedings were over within half an hour and the trial is due to resume on 25 October. She says they have asked for a larger courtroom so that all the church members who wish to attend can do so.

Abbot David likened the continuing moves against his church to "the best years of Bolshevism". He reported that all the monks and nuns arrested in January 2004 for attending the liturgy led by Jovan in his father's flat in the south-western town of Bitola have now been summoned for trial. The prosecutor's office appealed to the Appeal Court after they were freed. "They will pursue this until we are all in jail," he told Forum 18. "Most of the summonses were sent already in September, but they were not delivered to us, since we were all expelled from our monasteries, so they do not know our present addresses."

He added that a priest who was badly beaten last year when their church was demolished now stands accused as the originator of all of the troubles. "It is getting worse, and worse, day by day, and we do not know what to do, except to pray and to fast," Abbot David observed.

But he expressed his admiration for the way Archbishop Jovan is bearing the repeated legal cases. "We saw him today in court and his face was beautiful. He faces trial after trial, but does not lose his spirit and you can see joy in his face. His trials are a new testimony of faith – he stands there for his religious convictions."

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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