

KESTON INSTITUTE NEWS SERVICE (UK)

Friday 3 December 1999

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DESTRUCTION OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCHES IN KOSOVO

A few days ago the Raska and Prizren Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo published an illustrated 50-page publication 'Raspeto Kosovo' (Kosovo Crucified), with a photo-documentation showing the destruction or heavy damaging of 76 of its churches and monasteries since the peace agreement in June 1999.

An earlier publication on the same issue, published in September 1999, already spoke of about 50 such cases. In the introduction the Serbian Patriarch PAVLE writes: 'It is distressing to learn that in the year of the greatest Christian Jubilee, at the end of two millenia of Christianity, Christian churches are still being destroyed, not in war but in a time of peace guaranteed by the international community.'

Hieromonk SAVA (Decanac), Protosingel and Secretary to the Bishop of Raska and Prizren (who is also known as the cybermonk because of the web-site he hosts), spoke to the Keston News Service about the church destruction.

'Serbian churches and monasteries in Kosovo are being destroyed in a systematic and organised way. In the American sector there are 21 destroyed or heavily damaged churches and monasteries, in the Italian sector 21, in the German sector 17, in the British sector 10 and in the French sector 7. Some of them are monasteries from the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries, but a significant number of them are churches built in recent times. For instance, monastery of the Holy Trinity near Suva Reka was built in the 14th century. It was firstly plundered, then burned, and at the end dynamited. The Church of the Mother of God (Crkva Svete Bogorodice) in Musutiste, also from 14th century, was also dynamited. This church was one of the most beautiful Serbian churches of the Byzantine style in Kosovo, some even said that it was more beautiful than the Monastery of Gracanica...also the Church of St Mark of Koris from the 15th century was dynamited and destroyed.

'Unfortunately, there is a tendency that churches and monasteries which have previously only been damaged and partly burned are later are levelled by people who know how to use dynamite for its strongest effect. And then, even the stones have been taken away, so that there is literally nothing left at the site.

We should emphasise that all the mosques destroyed and damaged in Kosovo were mostly hit during the conflicts with the KLA, while the mosques in cities (like Prizren and Pristina) were mostly preserved. There was no systematic destruction of mosques. However, what is happening today is the destruction of churches and monasteries in peace, without any military operations going on, and in areas from which the Serbs have retreated. This is an ideology which aims to destroy everything that belongs to the Serbian cultural and spiritual heritage, and thereby to prevent the return of the Serbian people. Where there are churches destroyed, cemeteries desecrated,

monuments broken and missing, houses burned and levelled, people have no place to return to - and so the collective memory fades away.

'The irony in all of this is that we [the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo] stood up when the Albanians were persecuted and we gave them shelter in the Monastery of Decani, for instance. We tried to protect them the best way we could.

'The Serbian and other non-Albanian peoples in Kosovo are the most persecuted people in Europe, if not the world, and this is because of their ethnic origin. Because of who they are, they have been denied the right to move freely, the right to work, the right to worship freely, to use hospitals, even to come close to the University, let alone to study in it. We are safe only in a few places where we are surrounded by the KFOR for our protection. Otherwise, we are kidnapped or killed.

Press-conferences held by KFOR and UNMIK have been saying that the number of incidents and killings has been diminishing lately. Father Sava comments: 'The number of violent attacks and killings is diminishing indeed, but only because there are no more Serbs to be killed. In Pristina (the capital city of Kosovo) there are only 400 Serbs left. I am invited to a Conference on human rights that is to be held in Pristina on 10 December. I will not go. I cannot sit there and speak while 2-3 hundred metres from that place Serbs are being hunted like animals - you heard how the University professor was lynched on the streets of Pristina a few days ago, because he was a Serb.

'KFOR and UNMIK are trying to diminish the whole situation. They reported that day that a Serb was killed and that an Albanian was also killed. What they did not report was that the Albanian was killed in Klina where there are no Serbs. It is not that the Albanians are killing Serbs and that the Serbs are killing Albanians - there can be no parallel on reciprocity drawn here.

'Under the full authority of the international community, KFOR is protecting the Serbs mainly in the areas where there is not likely to be conflict with the Albanians. They do not want to open fire on Albanians.

I am convinced that UNMIK is trying to minimise the reporting of all of these issues, because its financing might come under question.

About the recent departure of three hundred Roman Catholic Croats from Kosovo to Croatia, and of some Jews out of the very few remaining, Father Sava comments: 'The (Slavic) Muslims are leaving too. When we saw him in Amman, Jordan a few days ago, the Belgrade mufti Jusufspahic confirmed to us that both the Muslim Slavs (Goranci) and the Albanians from Kosovo are coming to him terrified about what the KLA is doing. It is clear that there is no revenge involved, but the aim is to clear Kosovo of all non-Albanians, with the silent approval of the international community.

'In the past, Keston reported a great deal on the persecution of Christians in the former Soviet Union. Now there is an opportunity to speak of this new persecution that is happening in the presence of 50,000 soldiers of the strongest military power in the world,' Father Sava concluded in his interview for KNS.