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DISPUTE OVER KOSOVO MONASTERY LAND

by Felix Corley and Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service

The United Nations administrator for the Pec region of Kosovo has told Keston News Service that a dispute over agricultural land next to the Serbian Orthodox monastery at Decani monastery is 'completely past, over'. The Belgrade-based media complained in late May that the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) had 'confiscated' the land, which the monks use to support themselves. The land was returned to the monastery by the Serbian government in 1997. The UN administrator told the monks that they could continue to cultivate the land that the local Albanian population claim is disputed. However, a Serbian Orthodox monk is worried that UNMIK still considers it to be disputed, although this particular land is back in use by the monastery. He told Keston that the monks feared that the Albanian population was striving to oust the community entirely.

The UNMIK regional administrator, ALAIN LEROY, told Keston from Pec on 6 June that the local UNMIK administrator for Decani, HELINA KOKKARINEN, told the monks of Decani in late May that the Albanians had disputed their ownership of the land. 'The monks interpreted this as meaning that they were not allowed to cultivate the land,' Leroy told Keston. 'I clarified the situation within 24 hours. We decided that the monastery is able to cultivate the land as its land. We communicated this to the monks and they were very happy.'

Much of the Decani monastery's land was confiscated by the Yugoslav Communist government in the 1940s. A bee-keeping cooperative was established on part of it in the mid-1970s with a modern plant for the packaging of honey. As this was the most fertile parcel of land, the brotherhood of the monastery determinedly sought to have it returned and was finally successful in 1997. DRAGOMIR KALANJ, a legal adviser to the Diocesan Executive Board of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade told Keston on 31 May that the Serbian government acted upon several requests from monasteries in Kosovo in 1997 and 1998, returning land at Decani, Gracanica and the old Patriarchate in Pec. 'To my understanding more of the land was returned just prior to the NATO aggression,' Kalanj declared. 'The Serbian government acted through its Directorate for Properties who issued the gift certificates to the monasteries and signed contracts on behalf of the state. I believe that the return of the land to the Decani monastery was done upon the initiative of the Serbian government.'

The Belgrade-based paper Glas Javnosti reported on 27 May that the monastery had been forbidden to use the land under orders from the local UNMIK administration, citing Father SAVA JANJIC, a monk of the Decani monastery and a member of the Serbian National Council of Kosovo and Metohija. After the war in Kosovo and the arrival of the UN mission a year ago, the paper claimed, the local Albanians, who forcibly expelled all Serbs not only from the Decani municipality but from the entire Pec region, resolved to take away the land and take over the cooperative. The brotherhood of the monastery proposed that the machines in the processing plant be given to the Albanians so that they could transfer it elsewhere, and that the land and the building remain in the ownership of the monastery. However, the paper continued, the Albanians rejected this proposal, applying pressure on UNMIK to take away the land from the monastery because 'it is contested'.

`By this decision which forbids the use of already sown monastery land, great harm has been inflicted on the monastery and the brotherhood which is slowly being forced behind the very walls of this shrine,' Father Sava told the paper. `The Diocese of Raska and Prizren considers this unjust decision to be a clear sign of the weakness of the UN mission which is making concessions to the Albanians who clearly want to ethnically cleanse one of the last remaining oases in the region of Metohija. The Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian National Council of Kosmet firmly demand that the UN mission withdraw this decision and that it does not allow the usurpation of monastery land which is essential to the survival of this monastic community.'

The Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade joined in the protest. In a 29 May statement, it called for the rule of justice asking how it was possible to dispute this land, as the Albanian side and UNMIK claim, when it has belonged to the Decani monastery for centuries. `Knowing that for our brethren, Christians from Western Europe and other countries of western civilisation, private property is considered almost sacred, we ask whether this case is creating a legal precedent to be implemented only on Serbs and the Serbian church, or whether this new law will be valid for their countries as well?'

Father Sava told Keston on 8 June that Leroy had indeed confirmed that the monastery could continue to use the land, but reported that UNMIK had built a fence round it which the monks wanted removed. Father Sava remained concerned that UNMIK still questioned the monastery's ownership. `So allowing us to use the land is now an act of Mr Leroy's mercy and not the complete withdrawal of his decision,' Father Sava declared. `On the other hand the bee factory building is sealed by KFOR and UNMIK although the building lawfully belongs to the monastery.' Father Sava confirms that the machines on the site do not belong to the monastery and that the monks are happy to hand them over to UNMIK and the Albanian population if they are needed.

Decani lies in the sector of KFOR's Multinational Brigade West and the Italians are in charge of security for the monastery. A spokesman for the Italian command told Keston on 1 June that the question of ownership of and access to the monastery lands `does not fall within the competence of KFOR', declaring that KFOR was responsible only for security issues, such as preventing ethnic friction, ensuring freedom of movement and preventing weapons and drug smuggling. `The Decani monastery is under our protection,' the spokesman added, though he declined on security grounds to elaborate on what measures the Italian troops have taken to ensure the physical security of the monks and the monastery.

Despite the presence of Italian troops, Father Sava is worried for the monks' security as they use their land. `True the monks gathered hay from that piece of land last week but they were not given any special KFOR protection although the monks requested it,' he declared. `We are afraid that UNMIK will soon allow the Albanians into the bee factory which will make our use of the land totally impossible because of the security situation. De facto that will mean that the land does not belong to us.'

With Leroy's decision to allow the monks to continue using the land, it appears that UNMIK believes this dispute is over. `It was a 24-hour agitation, no more,' Leroy told Keston. Father Sava asserts that the decision has not halted what he believes is a campaign to oust the Orthodox community. `The Albanians in Decani still continue to exert pressure with the final goal to remove the brotherhood from the monastery and make the entire monastery complex a museum. The Church will strongly resist this.' (END)