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KOSOVO: DYNAMITING OF ORTHODOX CHURCHES CONTINUES

by Branko Bjelajac and Felix Corley, Keston News Service

In mid-July another Serbian Orthodox church in Kosovo was reduced to rubble, the latest in what appears to be a systematic campaign to destroy all Serbian Orthodox religious sites in the disputed province which the Orthodox blame on 'Albanian extremists'. With more than 100 buildings either destroyed or badly damaged in the year since the Kosovo Stabilisation Force (KFOR) and the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) took over the administration of the province under the United Nations mandate, Serbian Orthodox representatives have told Keston News Service that the international administration is not doing enough to protect their places of worship. The chairman of the Kosovo Helsinki Committee told Keston from Pristina that it had not yet been proved that Albanians were behind the attacks and called on KFOR and UNMIK to do more to investigate them and to prevent further such attacks. However, an UNMIK spokeswoman rejected Albanian suggestions that such destructions might be the work of agents of Belgrade and backed up Serbian Orthodox claims that Albanians were to blame.

The Church of the Holy Prophet Elijah in Pomazatin, on the left bank of the river Drenica, 12 kilometres west of Pristina, was dynamited in a powerful explosion late on 16 July. The church - built in 1937 and partially destroyed by the Balli units (Albanian fascists) in 1941 - was rebuilt in 1965 and served as a parish church until several years ago, when it became partially inactive. On 3 August 1999, after the deployment of substantial British KFOR units in the vicinity of the church, attackers used a hand grenade to destroy the entrance, just one day after the liturgy was held in the church to commemorate St Elijah's Day. 'Despite this damage the church could be easily repaired and the Diocese requested KFOR to secure the church from further destruction,' the Diocese of Raska and Prizren declared in a statement. 'KFOR only surrounded the church with barbed wire and from time to time patrols would pass by.'

The former parish priest of Pomazatin, RADIVOJE PANIC, visited the ruined church in the wake of the attack. 'He called us and reported that the Albanian extremists used 30 kilograms of explosive to completely destroy it. There is only a pile of stones left. A very sad picture, very said,' SRDJAN JABLANOVIC, head of the Raska and Prizren diocesan office in Belgrade told Keston. 'I used to go to visit this church when I lived in Kosovo to report on the damage carried out by Albanian extremists in the early 1990s - broken roof, damaged door, damaged candlesticks, etc. I believe that KFOR is now trying to make some sort of excuse by saying that the church building was not in use.' Jablanovic pointed out that there is a 'great concentration' of KFOR soldiers in the area, since the church is close to Slatina airport and a major coal mine, and lies right next to the Pristina to Pec railway. 'If this church could not be protected, do any have a better change? The [KFOR] barracks are only a hundred meters away.'

The Pomazatin church was the third in six weeks to be dynamited after earlier damage by burning or looting. On 29 June attackers used dynamite to destroy St Paraskeva church in Podgorce village, in the municipality of Kosovska Vitina. This church - which had been built in the 1990s and consecrated in 1996 - had been seriously damaged in August last year, but this time was completely destroyed. After the Serbs left the village in June 1999, the church

was not in use. The first attack last year was perpetrated after looting of its movable treasure and desecration of the altar and the whole building, and then it was set on fire. The Serbian National Council issued a strong protest to KFOR and to the UNMIK authorities. Representatives went to Camp Bondsteel, the US military base in Kosovo, and protested to the US general in command. On 1 July KFOR spokesman Captain RUSSELL BERG announced that two people had been detained in connection with this blast.

At the end of May the Church of St Nicholas in Srbinje village near Gracanica Monastery was attacked for the third time in ten months and finally destroyed in a dynamite explosion. Finnish Colonel ARTO RATY told the press: 'If a church has value as a historical place then clearly it should be guarded, but if it has no historical value and there is no chance of the Serbs returning anytime soon in the area, then it should be gently dismantled.' But Hieromonk SAVA of the Decani Monastery commented to Reuters on this occasion: 'Probably 95 per cent of Kosovo cultural heritage sites are Orthodox buildings. These need saving not just for the Serbs, but for all Europeans.'

In the early hours of 22 June, at least six mortar grenades landed in the vicinity of the Decani monastery church (see separate KNS article). Keston has sought the views of KFOR, UNMIK, the Kosovo Helsinki Committee as well as Serbian Orthodox representatives in Kosovo (see article below). (END)