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KOSOVO: ATTACKS ON DECANI MONASTERY

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The monks of the Serbian Orthodox monastery at Decani near Pec have complained of what they claim is the theft of wood from their forest as contractors build a new reservoir. They also protested against a grenade attack on the historic monastery that came close to hitting the monastery's church. The embattled monks now fear the reopened road above the monastery could be used to launch further attacks.

However, the local administrator for the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) told Keston News Service from Pec that the Kosovo Stabilisation Force (KFOR) will closely monitor traffic on the road.

The local UNMIK office in Decani approved building of a reservoir for the municipality in September last year. However, when the works began in June, the local contractors started to cut down trees on its property only 50 metres from the monastery. 'The consequences of this illegal operation are deplorable. More than 40 cubic metres of pine wood have been cut and stolen by ethnic Albanians in their trucks,' Father SAVA JANJIC told Keston. 'At least twenty more trees have been burned because the contractors wanted to verify that the terrain is not mined.' Father Sava stressed that the wood had been planted three centuries ago by Decani monks. 'The majority of the cut pines, which were the landmark of Decani Monastery, are more than 150 years old.'

The Serbian Orthodox Church lodged a sharp protest with UNMIK and KFOR about this latest attack on church property, and about another plan to reopen a road above the monastery to allow unhindered passage for local people, which the monks believe would pose a threat to their security. In its statement of 14 June, the Diocese of Raska and Prizren even published the full text of the UNMIK instructions about the wood. 'The newest transgression demonstrates that the local administrators of UNMIK in Pec and Decani are continuing their campaign against the monastery of Upper Decani with the local Albanian authorities who wish to expel the last Serbs from the Decani region at any price,' the diocesan statement declares. In the wake of the incident Bishop ARTEMIJE telephoned JAVIER SOLANA, the high representative of the European Union for security and foreign affairs. 'I told Solana that since our meeting in Brussels in the middle of May nothing of what was agreed upon had been implemented on the ground. Representatives of UNMIK in Pec and in Decani are behaving like the lords of all of Kosovo and Metohija,' Bishop Artemije told the Belgrade daily Danas.

Only a week later, in the early hours of 22 June, at least six mortar grenades landed close to the Decani monastery church. The grenades fell in the garden, only one hundred meters from the church building and a monk's house. The last grenade fell even closer. The Orthodox believe this attack (the second in the last six months) was the local Albanians' reaction to the diocese's protest about the trees. 'This is the second mortar attack in the last six months and clearly shows that the aim of the local Albanian authorities in Decani is not to reactivate the bee-cooperative or to build a water system, but to completely expel the monastic brotherhood from this region,' Father Sava told Keston.

Father Sava told Keston that on 21 June the UNMIK administrator for Pec region ALAIN LEROY decided that the COOPI company urgently cease further works on the water system which had begun on monastery land without consent from the monastery.

`After the protest of the monastery and the diocese, the UN Mission decided to stop further water system works,' a 22 June statement from the diocese noted. `Local Albanians were also ordered to return to the monastery the wood which has been stolen from the Church forest.'

DAVID MITCHELL, who took over several weeks ago from Leroy as UNMIK regional administrator, told Keston from Pec on 25 July that the incidents had happened before he took up his post. However, he noted that when he visited the monastery he saw wood piled up outside. `That must have been the wood that was returned,' he told Keston. He understood that the site for the new reservoir - one of four originally proposed - had been approved by all parties, including the monastery. Over the boundaries of the monastery land, Mitchell declared that the courts would have to rule in cases of dispute. `If you wanted to decide what is monastery land, you would have to go to the courts,' he stressed. `UNMIK recognises the status quo.' Mitchell was not aware of any pending legal cases.

Mitchell confirmed that KFOR had reopened the road above the monastery in July, after the grenade attacks, but stressed that the road is under `strict KFOR control'. He reported that there has been `shouting and things like that but nothing of any serious nature', but added that KFOR is monitoring the traffic very carefully.

In late May the Decani Monastery faced troubles with the local Albanian population over disputed agricultural land which the monks believed UNMIK had given to the local Albanian population. However, UNMIK ruled that the monks could still use it (see KNS 8 June 2000).
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