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Kosovo: Three Orthodox Churches Levelled in August

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service

Between 14 and 22 August, three Serbian Orthodox churches were levelled in Kosovo, despite being under KFOR protection. The Serbian Orthodox Church will include these latest attacks in the third edition of its full colour booklet 'Crucified Kosovo', detailing the desecration and destruction of almost 100 churches, monasteries and religious buildings in Kosovo since June 1999.

The local Serbian Orthodox diocese has alleged that in one of the three destructions, troops from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) serving with the international force KFOR allowed the destruction to take place – the second such allegation of UAE collusion in church attacks. Both Major SCOTT SLATEN, spokesman for KFOR, and Lt. Col. SALIM AL-SOOBUSI, spokesman for the UAE Defence Ministry in Dubai, have promised to respond to Keston's enquiry about the alleged role of UAE troops in these church destructions. Keston is awaiting the responses.

Representatives of the international agencies administering the province under the United Nations mandate have repeatedly condemned the attacks on Serbian Orthodox sites. SUSAN MANUEL, spokeswoman for the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), told Keston on 9 September that the destruction of Orthodox churches remains 'a sickening aspect of life in today's Kosovo'.

In the early hours of 18 August the Church of St Elijah in Vucitrn, central Kosovo, was dynamited. When Bishop ARTEMIJE of Raska and Prizren and his entourage tried to visit the site the following day they were denied entrance to Vucitrn by UAE troops.

St Elijah's was built in 1834 on the site of a pre-existing medieval Serbian Orthodox church and was active until June 1999, when it was looted and vandalised by Albanian extremists in the presence of French KFOR troops. At the time of its destruction the church was under the protection of KFOR troops from the UAE. The Orthodox diocese strongly condemned the attack and requested that KFOR conduct an immediate investigation and bring the perpetrators to justice. 'From well-informed sources, the Diocese of Raska and Prizren has learned that the church was "secured" by no fewer than 20 UAE troops who permitted Albanian terrorists to carry out an attack on the Church,' a statement issued by the diocese and the Serbian National Council of Kosovo declared.

The statement alleged that there had also been collusion by UAE troops in the destruction of a church in the nearby village of Banjska on 30 January 2000. 'During the previous destruction of the church of St Nicholas in Banjska,' the statement claimed, 'the Diocese learned from well-informed sources that the attack was coordinated with UAE troops, who withdrew at the decisive moment and permitted the terrorists to destroy the church.'

After being turned away from Vucitrn, the delegation visited the village of Velika Reka where they learned that the Church of Ss Peter and Paul, built in 1998, had been completely levelled a few days earlier. 'It is obvious that the church was professionally mined, and

KFOR did not protect this church despite numerous requests,' a further statement from the SNC declared. The church building had been looted and then dynamited on 19 July 1999 despite the presence nearby of German KFOR troops. The remaining walls and the bell tower were awaiting reconstruction when this latest attack occurred.

Also destroyed was the Church of the Holy Trinity in Velika Reka, which was levelled to the ground on 19 August, the Orthodox feast of the Transfiguration. First attacked on 20 June 1999, it had been attacked on five subsequent occasions before being levelled in August. Erected in 1995 with funds donated by an individual Serb and consecrated by Patriarch PAVLE in 1996, the church served the recently settled Serbian refugee community from Bosnia and Croatia. 'It was supposed to serve as a point of gathering to the refugees who have lost most of their possessions and loved ones in the previous war,' SRDJAN JABLANOVIC, head of the diocesan office in Belgrade told Keston by telephone from Soko Banja.

'Almost all the churches in the neighbourhood of Vucitrn, seven of them, are now levelled,' Jablanovic noted sadly. (END)