

KESTON NEWS SERVICE

11 September 2000

Kosovo: Orthodox Cemetery Church Damaged in Grenade Attack

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service

Late on 1 September, unknown attackers damaged and desecrated the Church of St Nicholas at the Orthodox cemetery in the village of Musnikovo, Sredacka Zupa, 10 miles south of Prizren. An explosion caused by a hand grenade destroyed the church roof and damaged the interior of the building, including a seventeenth-century icon of the Mother of God. It also damaged the wall of the nearby cemetery. Since June hundreds of gravestones have been defaced or destroyed in other attacks on Orthodox cemeteries.

The Musnikovo church is located in the German KFOR zone and KFOR troops immediately investigated the incident. 'A KFOR Task Force [Multinational Brigade South] Prizren patrol responded to the scene,' a KFOR statement of 3 September reported, 'and discovered that the wall of the cemetery, the roof of the chapel and a picture of the holy Madonna had been damaged in the blast. The investigation is still ongoing.'

The Church of St Nicholas was built and decorated in the second half of the sixteenth century, with several icons dating back to the seventeenth century. The parish priest Father ILIJA SMIGIC visited the site on 5 September to assess the damage and to report to the diocese. 'The diocese most strongly condemns this barbarian terrorist attack,' the diocese declared in a statement, 'which once again confirms that Albanian extremism in Kosovo is increasingly openly anti-Christian by nature.'

The Serbian National Council believes this attack to be tied to the plans of 58 Serbs to return to their homes in Musnikovo after spending a year as refugees. 'The group of Serbs visited their houses under the protection of KFOR only ten days ago. They are planning to return to their village soon,' SRDJAN JABLANOVIC, head of the diocesan office in Belgrade, told Keston on 6 September. 'We strongly believe that this attack and others like it are aimed at discouraging the Serbian population from returning to their homes. Whenever Albanian extremists see individual returnees or groups of people planning to return they try to discourage them. Recently we had so many attacks on churches and also on children at the playground, on cemeteries and such like.'

In its statement on the Musnikovo cemetery attack, the diocese noted with concern that attacks on Serbian cemeteries have recently become 'commonplace'. 'The Orthodox clergy in Pec, Decani and Prizren are constantly sending in information that Albanians are pouring rubbish and waste from the cities into Orthodox cemeteries or destroying and desecrating them by demolishing gravestones and crosses marking the graves.'

In addition to the three churches demolished in August (see separate KNS article) and the cemetery chapel damaged in September, gravestones in two locations have been desecrated recently. The Belgrade-based news agency Beta reported on 14 August that 120 Serbs under KFOR protection visited a graveyard in the southern part of Kosovska Mitrovica for the first time since June. They found approximately 500 gravestones destroyed or desecrated, a sharp increase since June when 200 gravestones were damaged mainly by removing the lettering from individual inscriptions. The Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Raska and

Prizren strongly condemned yet another attack. 'To date the Church and the [Serbian National] Council have received a multitude of information, especially from Metohija, regarding the systematic destruction and desecration of graves. In many locations our cemeteries are filled with great quantities of rubbish,' a statement complained.

On 22 August, the Belgrade daily Glas javnosti reported that a Serbian Orthodox graveyard in the village of Gornji Livoc near Gnjilane had been looted and burned. Many of the gravestones were damaged, engravings erased or carved out, and several family graves looted. The nearby KFOR troops managed to save the small chapel that the Serbs had been building over the last five years with hopes to open it as a church one day.

In early September Bishop ARTEMIJE of the Serbian Orthodox Church Diocese of Raska and Prizren and President of the Serbian National Council in Kosovo renewed his criticism of the attackers. 'The aim of the Albanian extremists is not only the biological extinction of Serbs in Kosovo or their exile from their centuries-old homes, but to cut their spiritual roots in the desire to wipe out every trace of our existence in Kosovo,' he claimed in a statement given to Keston on 6 September in Belgrade. 'This lies behind the church and cemetery destructions. However, we hope that, if God permits, and the Serbian church continues to work, we will remain in Kosovo.' (END)