

KOSOVO: ORTHODOX REJECT OFFICIAL'S DENIAL OF ANTI-ORTHODOX ATTACKS

by Branko Bjelajac and Felix Corley, Keston News Service, 10 June 2002

A leading Serbian Orthodox monk in Kosovo has rejected remarks made to Keston News Service on 31 May by the chief advisor to Kosovo's prime minister that there had been no recent attacks on Orthodox sites in Kosovo. Ramadan Audiu, advisor to Prime Minister Bajram Rexhepi, had claimed: "No attacks have taken place on any Orthodox sites or personnel," adding: "Since 1 January of this year to today there have been no attacks at all on the Serbian minority, except for incidents started by the Serbs in the northern half of Mitrovica." Audiu had gone on to label Orthodox accounts of attacks in May as "disinformation and propaganda" (see KNS 31 May 2002). "With the blessing of Bishop Artemije, I feel obliged to respond to this preposterous lie which is seriously compromising the credibility of the prime minister and his closest associates," Father Sava (Janjic) told Keston on 6 June from the Decani monastery.

"We cannot believe that Mr. Audiu and the office of Kosovo's prime minister do not have information that the campaign against the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo is continuing," Father Sava declared. He believed Audiu's remarks to Keston represented an attempt to hide the truth from the public, especially in the West, and to pretend that the "extremely difficult position" of the Serbian Orthodox in Kosovo is better than it is in reality. "Labelling the statements issued by our diocese as 'disinformation and propaganda' throws a disappointing shadow on the recent encouraging statements and actions by Kosovo Albanian officials and brings Mr. Audiu on the position of extremism and intolerance." He added that such a position by Kosovo government officials "hardly contributes to confidence building between the communities in the province".

Father Sava noted that continuing attacks – including those on churches, graveyards and nuns over Orthodox Easter, celebrated in early May – had been documented by Keston, as well as by his own diocese of Raska and Prizren, and by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The latest OSCE Assessment of the Situation of Ethnic Minorities in Kosovo (covering the period from September 2001 to April 2002) contains details of attacks on Kosovo Serbs in paragraphs 196-203 (p. 56-57)

http://www.osce.org/kosovo/documents/reports/minorities/min_rep_09_eng.pdf
"Kosovo Serbs also continue to suffer violations of property rights, which include coercion to sell property, destruction of property and attacks on religious monuments and sites and desecration of cemeteries," (p. 56, Para. 197).

Father Sava reported that his diocese has not yet been able to confirm several other reports of desecrations "due to the lack of free movement", but added that there is plenty of evidence that the destruction of the Serbian Orthodox heritage in Kosovo is continuing three years after the war.

In the wake of the Easter attacks, Bishop Artemije wrote a strong letter of protest to the commander of the NATO-led peacekeeping force KFOR, Lt. Gen. Marcel Valentin. "I can only assure you that these acts of vandalism are clearly a part of the wider strategy to discourage returns of Serb IDPs [internally displaced persons] and to

change the cultural identity of the region which has been known for its valuable Serbian Orthodox sites worldwide," he wrote in his 15 May letter. The bishop claimed that the strategy was aimed at changing the ethnic and cultural identity of Kosovo as part of a plan by Kosovo Albanian leaders to accelerate the process of independence, "which would essentially be a 'state' tailored to the measure of Albanian people".

Bishop Artemije maintained that local Albanian leaders might be behind the attacks. "I also have serious suspicions that local Albanian-led municipal councils consciously turn a blind eye towards these acts or perhaps even encourage them." The diocese also asked for increased protection of its holy sites from KFOR and the United Nations Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK. (END)