

MACEDONIA: WAS CHURCH FIRE ARSON?

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 11 December 2001

Amid continuing ethnic tension in Macedonia, and destruction of places of worship, police who investigated the burnt-out remains of an Orthodox church in the Tetovo region of north-western Macedonia believe the fire was started deliberately, according to the Macedonian daily paper *Utrinski vesnik*. Archpriest Mirko Stankoski of the Tetovo parish visited the burnt-out church on 10 December with officials of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). "What can I say? It is a terrible picture," he told Keston News Service by telephone from the town on 11 December. "I managed to salvage the remnants of a few icons and candle stands and I put them up in my own church in Tetovo this morning." The OSCE, while declining to comment on whether the fire was due to arson, told Keston of its concern that the church burning might stir up further conflict. "Our team went with a delegation of priests of the Macedonian Orthodox Church to see the site in Recica that was burned three days ago," Florin Pasnicu of the OSCE Spillover Monitoring Mission to Skopje told Keston on 11 December from the Macedonian capital. "Since we cannot perform any investigation we rely on the official statements."

The Church of Sveti Gorgija (St George) in the monastery complex in the village of Mala Recica near Tetovo was burned down on 8 December. Firefighters from Tetovo managed to save the "konak" (monastery accommodation) on that day, but it was set on fire again in the early hours of 9 December, St. George's day according to the Orthodox calendar.

The last three months have seen a series of attacks on Orthodox churches in the region west of Tetovo close to the border with Kosovo, an area mainly inhabited by ethnic Albanians. Mosques in Macedonian-populated areas have also been destroyed.

St George's church was built in the 1920s, on the foundations of church remains from 13th century, and the monastery konak and other buildings were completed in 1965. The Ministry of Culture had designated the church a cultural monument of the highest rank, because of its importance for the study of the remains of frescoes from the 14th century. The remains have now been destroyed.

Fr Stankoski reported that the police had informed him that the church building was set on fire in the late afternoon of 8 December, and the konak early the following morning. "We have had no services there since the people left in the wake of the troubles that started last summer."

"The region is no longer safe for us to perform our religious services, and we fear for the future and pray to God to help us and calm the situation," Fr Stankoski complained. "In the last three months, new damage has been done to the monastery in Neprosteni, and many churches in the vicinity of Sar planina mountain have been burgled and icons and other fittings destroyed or damaged."

He reported that a series of churches had been "systematically desecrated", citing, among others, the church of St Kuzma and St Damjan in the village of Jedoarce, the church of St Georgije in Otunje, the churches of the Holy Mother of God in Setole

and Jelosino, the church of St Athanasius in Trebos. "So far, in my parish alone, 25 to 30 churches have been burgled and desecrated. The church of St. Nicola in Slatina has been burned down. We get reports only when some of our believers return temporarily to take care of their property, because the people have left that region as well."

The special governmental Coordination Body for Crisis Management declared on 9 December that "during the armed conflicts in Tetovo and Kumanovo crisis region, at least 30 religious sites, mostly churches, have been destroyed. Among them are the monastery complex in Lesok, the churches of St Nikola, the Holy Mother of God and St Petka, as well as the Arabati Baba Teke and Coloured Mosque in Tetovo, and the Matejce monastery in Kumanovo area."

"We deplore and we deeply regret that these things are happening with religious sites in Western Macedonia," Pasnicu of the OSCE told Keston. "We are concerned about the impact this might have on the second phase of the police redeployment plan, which is essential to the reinstating of security and safety in the region. Any further event of this kind might harm the process that is so needed at this time." (END)