

KOSOVO: Orthodox Church Stoned and Burgled

by Branko Bjelajac and Felix Corley, Keston News Service, 11 May 2001

The Serbian Orthodox Church of St Dimitrije in the village of Susica, near Gracanica monastery in Kosovo, was stoned, broken into and burgled on 6 May, parish priest Fr Bogomir Stevic told Keston News Service. 'We had no incidents recently, but this might be a sign the situation is worsening,' he declared. The attack is the first on an Orthodox site in Kosovo since February. A spokesman for the international peacekeeping force KFOR confirmed that plans to hand over responsibility for guarding sites from KFOR to a new police force – long resisted by the Orthodox – are 'on hold'.

'We have a constant problem with our Albanian neighbours grazing their cattle in our churchyard in Susica,' Fr Stevic told Keston by telephone from Gracanica monastery on 9 May. He reported that the church board recently decided to put up a fence to prevent cattle coming close to the church building. When some parishioners came to measure the yard at lunchtime on 6 May they were observed by the local population and soon a group of Albanian children, led by two adults, arrived with their cattle. They stoned the church windows and broke the doors. 'My parishioners told me that afterwards they found the offerings gone, the glass icons broken and the candles strewn all around. I am glad I did not dare leave the iconostas in the church.' No one has yet been charged.

KFOR spokesman Squadron Leader Roy Brown told Keston from the Pristina on 10 May that KFOR had the same information about the attack.

Srdjan Jablanovic, head of the Raska and Prizren Orthodox diocesan office in Belgrade, told Keston on 9 May that building work on the church had begun in 1991 on the foundations of a 14th century church. The church was consecrated in 1996.

'We fear this church might be destroyed like many others before, so I reported this incident to the Swedish KFOR unit in charge of security,' Fr Stevic declared. 'They left this church building unprotected one and a half years ago. Their officer told me then they have a special way of securing it, but all we see are two of their soldiers driving a jeep several times a day through the village.'

In the 18 months to last February, about a hundred Orthodox churches, monasteries, monuments and graveyards were seriously damaged or destroyed in Kosovo. 'KFOR joins the church in its condemnation of the past destruction of patrimonial sites,' Brown told Keston. 'We are committed to the continued security of these sites and the prevention of any further desecration of religious buildings and artefacts.' Brown stated that KFOR is currently guarding 146 Orthodox sites in all five Multinational Brigade areas into which Kosovo is divided, with the largest number is in the American-led Multinational Brigade East area. 'The sites are guarded to differing degrees, depending on the assessed threat to each. Some have permanent guards that live on site 24-hours per day, others a mixture of static guards and mobile patrols, while others are patrolled on a less frequent basis.'

He added that when KFOR first started guarding these sites, decisions had to be made

as to which would be given priority. `This was done in consultation with the local clergy, including representatives of Bishop Artemije, and based on the historical, symbolic and cultural, as well as religious significance of each site.'

On 2 May a delegation of international clergy visited Kosovo at the request of the Russian Orthodox Church. `KFOR was happy to facilitate this visit by providing security and transport,' Brown stated. `We also provided the bishops the opportunity to discuss theological issues with our own military chaplains and to visit Gracanica monastery for a private meeting with Bishop Artemije.'

When proposals were made last January to hand over responsibility for guarding some Orthodox sites to the Kosovo Police Service (KPS), an international and locally-recruited force under the control of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo, they were immediately resisted by local Orthodox, who feared the KPS would not show the same commitment or be well enough trained to provide adequate protection (see KNS 15 January 2001). Brown confirmed to Keston that the proposals are on hold `pending the KPS building the capability to take on the task and an overall improvement in the security situation'. (END)