

SERBIA - KOSOVO: UNMIK Wrongfully Arrest 70-Year-Old Nun

Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 12 August 2002

The Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church has issued a strong statement condemning the arrest by UNMIK police on 7 August of a 70 year old nun, the Prioress of Gracanica Monastery Mother Efrosinia, on false charges. UNMIK initially claimed that cannabis was being grown and consumed in the monastery, but the next day Charles Weber, UNMIK local police chief, confirmed to the local KIM Radio that the cannabis was just wild growing hemp. The Serbian Orthodox Church has asked for, but not yet received, a formal apology from UNMIK Police for the wrongful arrest of Mother Efrosina.

On 7 August, at about 20.30 hours, Mother Efrosinia was arrested by officers of the Kosovo Police Service in Gracanica, 5 miles east of Pristina, Kosovos' capital. She was questioned by a German police inspector until close to midnight and then released. The arrest was carried out as it was claimed that cannabis is being grown and consumed on about 100 square meters of the monastery. Speaking to the Raska & Prizren Diocesan Bulletin, Mother Efrosina said on 9 August that "this is a misunderstanding. The sisters of the monastery once raised hemp (prior to 1953) on that part of the monastery land and it is still growing wild on the edge of a meadow frequently used for landing by UNMIK helicopters. Hemp is a plant of poor people once raised by everyone and used to make clothes."

Local UNMIK police chief Charles Weber stated to the Belgrade daily Politika "We have noticed cannabis that grows like weeds in the monastery and it will be destroyed, regardless of whether if it is grown for industrial or grown for other purposes. With it this case is closed for us."

In making the arrest, the police broke an 800 year old Monastery charter (statute) which strictly prohibits entering the monastery after dusk to anyone. Members of the local Serbian population have stated that as the Police who performed the arrest were Serbs, they must have known of the Monastery charter and should have informed their superiors of it.

UNMIK Police have not yet made any arrests in response to the continuing series of violent attacks on Serbian Orthodox religious sites and people in Kosovo. (END)