

KOSOVO: CHAPEL BLOWN UP, TOMBSTONES DAMAGED

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 12 November 2001

Bishop Artemije (Radosavljevic) of Raska and Prizren has condemned the latest attack on a Serbian Orthodox religious site in Kosovo, the destruction of the chapel in the graveyard in the village of Staro Gracko (Gracke e Vjeter), near the town of Lipjan, 30 kilometres (20 miles) south of the Kosovo capital Pristina. "The small chapel is perhaps of no particular cultural or material value," he told Keston News Service on 9 November in Belgrade, "except that it is as precious to us as any of the 110 religious buildings and sites destroyed in Kosovo since the international forces arrived [in June 1999]."

The chapel was destroyed in the evening of 8 November by three dynamite explosions, which also caused damage to nearby tombstones within a radius of 30 metres (100 feet). The NATO-led peacekeeping force KFOR reported that no-one was injured in the attack and that an investigation has begun.

"This destruction of a chapel and tombstones ought not to provoke the Serbian population," Bishop Artemije added. "We are hurt by any destruction and we grieve because of it, but we should not be frightened." He described the attack as an attempt by "Albanian terrorists" to discourage the Serbs from participating in the Kosovo-wide elections due on 17 November, but he urged all Kosovo's Serbs to take part as he believed it was in their interest to do so.

"Explosive devices were set at the chapel's wall and three explosions were heard," Radio Gracanica reported on 9 November. "The intensity of the blast was such that many tombstones nearby were destroyed or severely damaged. The local population is frightened that this might herald the beginning of attacks by Albanian extremists. Last year there was an attempt to destroy the chapel, but only the gate to the yard was damaged."

KFOR troops investigated the site. "Three explosions were heard in the area of the graveyard at Gracke e Vjeter/Staro Gracko at approximately 1910 last night," reported a KFOR statement issued on 9 November in Pristina. "A KFOR patrol was dispatched to investigate. After calling for additional lighting, it became apparent that an explosive device had been set against the chapel causing serious damage to the building. No-one was injured in the attack and an investigation into this incident has begun."

The chapel destruction was the third incident related to religious life in Kosovo in a week. On 3 November, observing the Orthodox day of the dead, a hundred Serbs visited the Orthodox graveyard in Pristina, protected by an equal number of KFOR soldiers, only to discover that the majority of the graves had been destroyed, damaged or desecrated.

On 6 November officials of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK, prevented local Serbs from continuing to build an Orthodox church in the northern part of Kosovska Mitrovica, a city divided between the Serbian-populated north and

the Albanian-populated south, fearing a possible rise in tension ten days before the elections. (END)