

MACEDONIA: Destruction and Abuse of Religious Sites

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 15 August 2001

Article 48 of the Constitution deals with local communities. It states "The Republic guarantees the protection of the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of all communities." This article was perceived as significant by observers, in the light of the frequent abuse of religious sites in Macedonia during clashes between Albanian armed rebels and mostly Slavic security forces.

The Macedonian Islamic Community Reis-l-ulem Hafiz-Arif effendi Emini stated in an interview with the local news agency AIM that by May 2001, fifteen mosques had suffered serious destruction. In June this community expressed its regret about the killing of members of the security forces, but also alerted the press to the burning down of the mosques in Bitolj and Veles. In a press statement issued on 22 June, after the open letter from the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) asking for a military solution to the crisis, the Islamic Religious Community said that the MOC 'violated a recent agreement between all Macedonian religious communities reached under the auspices of the World Council of Churches... the world public already know that 40 mosques have been shelled and destroyed, but not a single church', quoted from the Skopje daily newspaper "Utrinski vesnik", 23 June.

Following a meeting in Morges, Switzerland, in a statement issued on 13 June representatives of the Orthodox, Catholic, Islamic, Methodist and Jewish religious communities 'strongly condemned the forced displacement of civilians, the abuse of rights of access to water and to aid for stated populations', and also that 'the recent violence and conflicts are not based on religion or religious differences'. The signatories also 'condemned the use of sacred places and buildings for military purposes and their desecration and destruction.'

However, attacks on Muslim religious sites continued. After the most recent terrorist attack on 7 August, when ten Macedonian soldiers were killed, despite the curfew imposed by the local police in the city of Prilep an angry mob of about 3,000 vandalised shops belonging to ethnic Albanians or Macedonian Muslims. As in the Bitolj incident in June, the local mosque in Prilep was burned to the ground the same night. Most of the soldiers who lost their lives were from this city.

'In Macedonia there are about 500 mosques, and in this conflict 44 of them were destroyed,' says Fazliu. 'Most of them were shelled by the Macedonian security forces, and some were burned by the angry mob. The truth is that no churches or monasteries have been destroyed in Macedonia, apart from some damage. The Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia repeatedly tried to present to the public our condemnation of the use of religious sites for military purposes, but no electronic or printed media in Macedonia were willing to publicise our statements. We were under media blockade. We have always been against the destruction of religious buildings and sites.'

Media reports in May stated that NLA rebels used certain Orthodox monasteries as their strongholds, in an attempt to prevent the security forces attacking the rebels. In the case of the Monastery in the village of Matejce, near the city of Kumanovo,

Patriarch Pavle of the Serbian Orthodox Church wrote on 27 June to Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General, and to Lord Robertson, NATO Secretary-General, asking for protection for this religious site. In response to the Serbian Patriarch, Lord Robertson wrote that his personal representative Peter Faith had visited Matejce on 13 July, and found that the village was totally destroyed due to the heavy fighting in June, but that the Orthodox church in the village was not damaged, except for a number of items that were removed or burned.

In response to the military use of religious sites in Macedonia, the OSCE Spillover Monitoring Mission to Skopje issued a statement on 7 August expressing its grave concern and stated that 'Albanian rebels in Macedonia appear to be using religious and cultural monuments as military bases... two such sites seem to be the Arabati Baba Teke Dervish monastery and the area next to the Painted Mosque in Tetovo... which is not acceptable to international law.' (END)