

KOSOVO: KFOR PLAN TO CEASE GUARDING ORTHODOX CHURCHES ON HOLD?

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 15 January 2001

Angry protests by Kosovar Serbian leaders - including the local Orthodox bishop - against plans to transfer responsibility for guarding Serbian Orthodox sites in Kosovo from the international peacekeeping force KFOR to international and locally-recruited police under the control of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) seem to have had some effect. An UNMIK spokesperson has told Keston News Service from Pristina that in view of the protests and the unpreparedness of the police for this role, the plan is now 'on hold'.

KFOR has failed to respond to Keston's enquiry as to the current status of the transfer plan. However, KFOR's commander has stressed to Bishop Artemije (Radosavljevic) of Raska and Prizren that the force does intend to reduce its activities in Kosovo. The bishop told Keston on 12 January that he is extremely concerned about the security of the surviving Orthodox sites if the transfer to the police goes ahead. This concern was echoed by the Serbian Church's Synodal Committee for Kosovo at its Belgrade meeting on the same day.

Immediately after KFOR's announcement of the plan on 5 January, Bishop Artemije wrote to Lieutenant General Carlo Cabigiosu, the KFOR commander, expressing his opposition and citing fears of 'what will happen when the task is taken over by Albanian policemen who were until recently KLA [Kosova Liberation Army] members committing atrocities against Serbs'.

KFOR initially tried to reassure the Serbs that the police were capable of protecting their religious sites. 'It is not a Serb or Albanian force, but a Kosovo force,' KFOR spokesman Captain Richard Kusak told B92, a Belgrade-based radio station, on 9 January. 'I think these people should be trusted - they were trained by the UN and they have to be unbiased. Their task is to serve Kosovo, and not the interests of one single nation.'

However, international officials soon started backtracking. 'KFOR seems to have decided to turn over the duty of guarding Orthodox churches to UNMIK police and the Kosovo Police Service,' UNMIK spokesperson Susan Manuel told Keston from Pristina on 11 January. 'Bishop Artemije has strongly protested this move and the UNMIK police I have talked with are also dubious that the police can handle the job. Therefore the transition is on hold.' Bishop Artemije complained that KFOR had decided to transfer responsibility without consulting or even informing him. 'That is why I reacted so strongly in my letter to General Cabigiosu,' he told Keston. 'I wrote to him that it is unthinkable to give this responsibility to people who were probably fighting against the Serbian people or who were instrumental in destroying our churches and holy sites. To leave the care and protection of our damaged and active churches and monasteries to them is like appointing a pyromaniac as a fire fighter.'

However, when General Cabigiosu visited Gracanica Monastery on 7 January, Serbian Orthodox Christmas day, he told the bishop that KFOR was not now proposing to hand over all responsibility for guarding religious sites, although it was still trying to reduce its overall activities. 'I hope that decision will not be realised in the foreseeable future, but we are afraid of any partial reduction of KFOR's activities,' Bishop Artemije declared. Although recognising UNMIK police as 'highly professional and responsible', he believed that with fewer than 3,000 officers (compared to KFOR's 45,000 troops) UNMIK was not up to the task. 'Their number could not be a guarantee of security for us.' Bishop Artemije cited the grenade attack on the Church of St Nicholas in Pristina in December (see KNS 5 January 2001), when even the

presence of KFOR troops was not enough to prevent an attack. 'What about the many other objects that are on a lower level of security, where a patrol only comes every now and then?'

Bishop Artemije confirmed that there have been fewer attacks on Orthodox sites since last September, but does not attribute this to a more favourable atmosphere. 'In the beginning attacks were much more frequent. Then KFOR consolidated its role of protecting the sites and, as we can see, has been trying its best lately. We are all the more concerned, now we have reached this level of security in the province, that KFOR wants to pull out and lay monasteries and churches open to potential damage.' Bishop Artemije argued that attacks both on churches and Serb individuals had fallen largely because so few of either remain to be attacked.

Susan Manuel of UNMIK concurred. 'There is no sign of any new-found tolerance within the Kosovo Albanian community, despite the constant criticism of the international community,' she told Keston. 'The violence against minorities has not abated.' (END)