

KOSOVO: HOW SHOULD ORTHODOX RESPOND TO MEDIA "LIBELS"?

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 17 December 2001

In the light of the refusal of the international bodies now governing Kosovo to take sanctions against three Albanian-language Kosovar papers which published articles about the Decani monastery which the Orthodox regard as libellous, despite media rules to stamp out such inter-ethnic libels, the Orthodox Church has declined to take up offers to publish responses in at least some of the papers. Veton Surroi, the publisher of Koha Ditore, one of the three papers that published allegations that the monastery had been a den of paramilitaries in 1998 and 1999, told Keston News Service on 13 December that the article did not necessarily reflect the views of the paper, solely the views of the individual making the allegations, and added that Father Sava (Janjic), who had led the complaints about the coverage, was "welcome" to publish a response in his paper. Father Sava told Keston that such a response was inadequate and that the international bodies should take action to prevent or punish such "hate speech".

Surroi argued that his paper was not responsible for the views of those they reported, but he failed to explain why the paper had repeated the claims editorially in its headlines. "Father Sava has been always invited to state his position in Koha Ditore, even in more difficult times of war, and he is always welcome to do so," Surroi told Keston. "Any citizen who wants to express a different view regarding anything published in Koha Ditore has always had the possibility to do so. If the Decani monastery wants to publish anything regarding this, they are welcome, and have been told so."

The three papers - Koha Ditore, Epoka E Re, and Zeri - published articles on 5 September reporting an open letter from Musa Berisha, President of the Decani-based Albanian Council of Human Rights Defence, alleging that the Decani monastery played a significant role housing Serbian "Nazis" - paramilitaries - during fighting in Kosovo in 1998 and 1999. The monastery's abbot, Father Teodosije, and his deputy, Father Sava, were accused of being willing hosts, and it was alleged that Father Sava also practised shooting nearby. The three different articles, signed by their authors, were published under the headlines: "Decani Monastery was always a House of Serb Nazis", "Decani Monastery was a House of the Serb Paramilitaries", and "The Decani Monastery was Always a House of Serb Formations Which Terrorised Albanians."

Believing this constituted "hate speech", the Orthodox asked the international community to act. Despite regulations issued by the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and a Temporary Code of Conduct for the Print Media in Kosovo, no reply was published and, according to Father Sava, UNMIK's Temporary Media Commissioner Anna Di Lellio failed to take any legal measures. Di Lellio told Keston that she closed the case "as it always does when the offer to write a reply is not taken up by the complainant."

Berisha's open letter came in response to an earlier Koha Ditore article by Ibrahim Kelmendi reporting that following a visit to the monastery on 30 August, the then KFOR commander Lieutenant General Thorstein Skiaker had paid tribute to the

monastery: "during the war in 1999, the Decani monastery priests rescued Kosovar Albanians from Serbian forces." Berisha rejected this out of hand, alleging that "The Decani monastery was a house of Serb paramilitary and military formations... and their aim was to terrorise the Albanian population of this part of Kosova."

Zeri published a longer version of Berisha's open letter, stating that "at the end of April [1998] eyewitnesses saw the priests and other staff of this monastery, approximately ten of them, including Sava Janjic [Father Sava], practising by shooting in the air with a machine gun and pistols not far from the monastery." The article added that in May 1998 six Albanians were killed near the monastery, implying that the same persons seen shooting were probably the killers.

Denying all these accusations, Father Sava wrote to the Council of Human Rights Defence in Decani, international representatives in Kosovo and to the Temporary Media Commissioner stating that Berisha's open letter "denigrates an ethnic or religious group and attributes criminal responsibility prior to a finding of guilt by a tribunal". He complained that publishing Berisha's letter in the print media violates UNMIK regulations 2000/36 and 2000/37. Father Sava believes publication of such material demonstrates "open disrespect towards Kosovo's ethnic, cultural and religious diversity by publishing unfounded information which creates damage and pain to a religious community".

"I wrote to the Council for Human Rights Defence and UNMIK in September saying it was a serious provocation and I had the right to be protected from hate speech," Fr Sava told Keston on 26 October. "Temporary media commissioner Anna di Lellio said that there was a similar case in Pristina but when she tried to do something her actions upset other human rights organisations because it upset the Albanians. She said it was better to forget about it as the Albanians would be very angry otherwise."

Di Lellio has a different version of events. "The TMC travelled to the Monastery of Decani on Thursday, 13 September, and visited Father Sava. The TMC considered the fact that the newspapers had published an open letter, not articles authored by their staff," she told Keston from Pristina on 30 November. "While the editorial decisions to publish such letter could be debatable, they are not subject to UNMIK regulation. The TMC suggested Father Sava to write a reply to the editors and he said that he would do so... Unfortunately, a few days later Father Sava sent an e-mail to the TMC saying that after careful consideration he had been advised by the Abbot not to write any reply... The TMC has been also advised that a very reputable Kosovo Albanian public figure offered Father Sava to visit the Monastery of Decani and appear on TV with him. Father Sava declined that offer too."

"After the initial idea to write some sort of a reply," Father Sava told Keston on 4 December, "we spoke about it (in the brotherhood) and concluded that it is absolutely tasteless to answer such incredible lies... and to put ourselves to the level of hear-say and tabloid type writings... Then the TMC came with the suggestion that Vetton Surroi come to the monastery with his journalists to underline the importance of the monastery for Kosovo society... We refused the proposal because it was Vetton's paper that put the worst headline and the word 'Nazi' about us. They used the word 'Nazi' even though it was not mentioned in that infamous letter."

Father Sava said it would be "pure hypocrisy" for the paper to publish allegations that the monastery was a "house of 'Nazis' and a paramilitary base" one day, and then to "make it up" and write about the importance of the monastery for Kosovo society. "Our monastery as well as our Church, out of its dignity, could not permit these Albanian papers to treat us they way they desire."

He added that "as a sign of protest against spreading of ethnic and religious hatred" his monastery had decided, with the blessing Bishop Artemije of Raska and Prizren, to have no contacts with representatives of the three papers until their editors "issue a public apology to the Monastery of Decani, and disassociate themselves from what they had written."

Fr Sava also wrote on 11 September to Marek Nowicki, Kosovo's Ombudsperson, asking him to "urgently take legal measures provided by UNMIK REG 2000/4". (REG 2000/4, adopted on 1 February 2000, is On the Prohibition Against Inciting to National, Racial, Religious or Ethnic Hatred, Discord or Intolerance.) The Ombudsman responded with a formal letter, as did the OSCE representative, Ambassador Dan Everts who promised to "do everything in his power". No action has been taken so far.

"The TMC closed the case," Di Lellio told Keston. "But it referred it to the NGO's Civil Society department of the OSCE, suggesting that the department looked into the Human Rights Group in Decani and tried to discuss the matter with them."

But Father Sava suggests a different perspective: "Kosovo is still an area without laws and order, and with open persecution of the non-Albanian population. Under such conditions to cling to the 'Convention of the freedom of the press' means de facto to misuse the freedom of the press against the freedom and dignity of undermined groups and individuals." (END)