

YUGOSLAVIA/KOSOVO: WAS MITROVICA CHURCH FIRE ARSON?

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 20 February 2002

Arguments are continuing over the cause of a fire which broke out in the "Prenos mostiju Svetog Save" Serbian Orthodox Church in the southern part of the divided city of Mitrovica in the evening of 16 February. Orthodox representatives have told Keston News Service they believe it was started deliberately, but the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the NATO-led peacekeeping force KFOR say that arson is unlikely as the site is heavily guarded by Greek KFOR troops. First official investigation reports are not expected for three weeks. No injuries were reported in the fire, which was extinguished after three hours by local firefighters assisted by a Greek KFOR fire brigade tender.

The church, completed and consecrated in 1921, after construction began in 1896, is considered one of the most beautiful Orthodox churches in Kosovo. It is situated in the part of Mitrovica now dominated by ethnic Albanians (Serbs live in the northern part of what they call Kosovska Mitrovica, divided by the river).

"The fire broke out beneath a wooden chest filled with candles, wrapping paper and incense, on the left side of the church," Fr Velimir (Velja) Stojanovic, the parish priest, told Keston by telephone on 19 February. "There were several hundred kilograms of inflammable material, and when the fire was set by the terrorists, first heavy smoke appeared, and then the fire itself."

The Greek soldiers who came to fight the fire could not at first enter the church because the smoke was so thick. Fr Velja described the damage as "enormous", adding that the whole church is covered with a layer of black greasy tar. The church is still in darkness as the electricity supply has not yet been reconnected. "We are not satisfied with the work of the local Albanian fire unit," he complained. "They were rather slow and unmotivated to fight the fire."

In remarks reported by the Belgrade-based radio and TV station B92 and the news agency Beta, the UNMIK spokesman for Mitrovica region, Gyorgy Kakuk, stated on 17 February that the "fire was probably accidental, caused either by lit candles or by an old electrical installation". Lt. Colonel Gottfried Salchner, KFOR spokesman in Pristina, also reported on 17 February: "A KFOR fire brigade tender supported the local fire brigade and the fire was completely extinguished by midnight. Nobody was injured but there was heavy damage to the interior of the church." He said investigations were continuing.

"We had not held a service with candles since the Friday morning liturgy," Fr Velja reported. "On Saturday - the day of the fire - we only rang the bells and decided not to have the evening service because so few people could come anyway." He pointed out that no candle had been lit in the church in the intervening 36 hours. He also dismissed suggestions an electrical fault could have sparked the fire as - at a time of regular shortages and power cuts in Kosovo - the electricity had been off on the Saturday since 6 pm. "The only explanation is that the fire was set by someone who came under cover of darkness and, what is more, who knew where to set it."

At a press conference in Mitrovica on 17 February, Kakuk announced that a special regional investigation unit would investigate the fire. "All the soldiers were interviewed, and we will

also speak to the tenants of the parish house, in the church yard," he declared, adding that it would take at least two to three weeks to complete the investigation.

"No official, and I repeat this, no UNMIK or police official has come to investigate the fire yet, though today is the fourth day," Fr Velja complained. "I see here journalists, KFOR protecting TV crews, and soldiers milling around as always, but no one else. I feel as if I am in a cage. We have no water, no electricity and no freedom to move, except under the protection of the Greek KFOR troops."

Among Kosovo's remaining Serbs, the fire in the "Prenos mostiju Svetog Save" Church is seen as another terrorist attack on their sanctuaries. In the last three years since international organisations took de facto control of Kosovo, 108 Orthodox churches, monasteries and graveyards have been damaged or destroyed. No offenders have been arrested or tried so far. UNMIK is expecting Serbian demonstrations in Mitrovica to follow. (END)