

KOSOVO: ONE ORTHODOX CHURCH DESTROYED, ANOTHER DAMAGED

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 25 November 2002

During the night of 16/17 November, unknown persons attacked two Serbian Orthodox churches in Pec (Peja) region of western Kosovo, destroying one completely and seriously damaging the other. "The Diocese of Raska and Prizren most strongly condemns these most recent barbarian attacks by Albanian extremists on Serbian churches," declared a diocesan communique sent to Keston News Service on 17 November, "and demands that KFOR immediately re-establish checkpoints near all endangered Orthodox churches."

No-one was hurt in these attacks and no perpetrators have been apprehended. The United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and KFOR have started an investigation. Almost all local political and international bodies condemned these latest attacks on Serbian religious sites, while UNMIK is already attempting to repair the damaged church although without the consent or involvement of the diocese (see separate KNS article).

The Church of all the Serbian Saints in the village of Djurakovac, 20 kilometres (13 miles) east of Pec on the Pec-Mitrovica road, was rocked by three powerful explosions at midnight on 16/17 November, which completely destroyed the interior and caused extensive structural damage. This church, built in 1998, was only briefly in use, since the Serbian population left the village after NATO troops entered Kosovo in summer 1999. It was protected by KFOR troops until two months ago, when the checkpoint was removed as KFOR believed the security situation in Kosovo had improved. An older church in the same village, the Church of St Nicholas with valuable 16th century frescoes, was completely destroyed in the summer of 1999 and a local Orthodox cemetery desecrated.

In the village of Ljubovo only 5 kilometres (3 miles) from Djurakovac, also abandoned by Serbs in 1999, the Church of St Basil of Ostrog the Miracle Worker was blown up in the early morning of 17 November and levelled to the ground. KFOR had protected the church since 1999, but protection was also withdrawn this summer. The church – consecrated in 1939 – had already been broken into and desecrated on 24 June after KFOR withdrew its guard, and has now been finally destroyed in a dynamite blast.

The Italian agency ANSA reported on 18 November a KFOR statement admitting that it "does not have permanent check-points adjoining the churches attacked" and asserting that "they had been abandoned for a long time and did not have historical and artistic value". Bishop Artemije (Radosavljevic) of Raska and Prizren strongly condemned the KFOR suggestion that only some Orthodox churches in Kosovo were worth defending, complaining in a written communique that it "openly encourages evildoers who destroy our holy temples to continue their barbaric feast".

Two days after the attacks, UNMIK head Michael Steiner, accompanied by Kosovo's Prime Minister Bajram Rexhepi, flew to the sites of the two damaged Orthodox churches in Istok municipality. KFOR Commander General Fabio Mini and Istok Municipal Assembly President Fadil Ferati joined the delegation, which included UNMIK Police Commissioner Stefan Feller and Director of Administration Philip Cooper, who remained in the area overnight to launch reconstruction work on one of the churches on 18 November.

"You see us here together... We're all united in condemning these acts of religious

vandalism," Steiner declared outside the destroyed Church of All the Serbian Saints in Djurakovac, according to a 17 November UNMIK press statement. "We will not speculate on who is responsible. The Police Commissioner is here and has already begun his investigation," Steiner continued. "KFOR will look into additional security where necessary. I spoke with President [Ibrahim] Rugova and Mr [Hashim] Thaci, who also condemned these acts." Thaci is a former guerrilla leader who heads the second biggest Albanian political party.

The international community in Kosovo and Yugoslavia also condemned the attacks. "Any attacks on religious sites of any faith are attacks on the very heart and soul of society and should be denounced in the strongest possible terms by all political and religious leaders," declared Reno Harnish, Chief of Mission of the United States Office in Pristina, in an 18 November statement. He added that such acts are "damaging to Kosovo's efforts to become tolerant, democratic society that is fully part of Europe." Jani Milickov, the Bulgarian Ambassador to Yugoslavia, offered the best Bulgarian restorers and fresco-painters to help restore and rebuild religious monuments in Kosovo.

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, who visited Kosovo on 19 and 20 November, likewise condemned the attacks. "The incident of last weekend when bombs were thrown into the churches is not something anyone can condone," he declared on 19 November at UNMIK headquarters in Pristina. "And those incidents and instances must stop."

In a rare move in the wake of the destruction of Orthodox sites in Kosovo, the Kosovo Islamic Community publicly joined condemnation of the attacks. "These acts of vandalism are aimed against tolerance, peace and trust between ethnic and religious communities in Kosovo," declared a statement, which also called for the perpetrators to be apprehended as soon as possible and brought to justice. (END)