

## KOSOVO: WHO SHOULD DEFEND AND REBUILD ORTHODOX CHURCHES?

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 25 November 2002

Speaking at the site of one of the two Orthodox churches extensively damaged by explosions on 16/17 November (see separate KNS article), the head of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo Michael Steiner pledged that UNMIK would undertake repairs to the church in Djurakovac. He added that the cost of the repairs would come from the Kosovo Consolidated Budget. Fr Sava (Janjic), deputy abbot of the Decani Monastery, pointed out that the two churches had been attacked after the NATO-led peacekeeping force KFOR withdrew permanent protection from them during the summer. "Recently, it is noticeable that UNMIK and KFOR consider that the situation has improved since there have been no major incidents," he told Keston News Service on 21 November. "Exactly that brought us to a point of weaker defence and attention, which helped the extremists attack."

The Orthodox Diocese of Raska and Prizren condemned the unilateral UNMIK attempt to renew the damaged Djurakovac church only three days after the incident occurred, mostly because it was done without prior consultation with the Church and the architects who had built it. "These works look more like the hiding of traces of the attack rather than a professional reconstruction which should certainly be necessary after three strong explosions inside the temple, and this could not be completed in three days," a diocesan statement declared. "The Diocese of Raska and Prizren believes this to be political marketing given that the arrival of special UNMIK television is expected the next day."

Some other commentators speculated that UNMIK's haste to be seen to be responding to the attack was motivated by the arrival of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on a visit to Kosovo on 19 and 20 November.

Fr Sava believes the attacks on Serbian Orthodox churches are unlikely to stop. "It is the campaign that started right after the war (1999) and which will, I am afraid, continue," he told Keston. He said the extremists' aim was to erase the cultural and spiritual identity of the Serbian people in Kosovo and to force the remaining Serbs to leave. He added that destruction of churches in areas designated for the return of Serbian refugees is aimed at discouraging the returnees. "The Albanian extremists believe that as long as there are Serbian churches, the Serbs retain an interest in Kosovo and Metohia," he declared. "This is why the churches are destroyed in such an expert and systematic way, by a logic and order known only to them – this they believe to be the best method to cut the Serbian Orthodox roots in this land." Fr Sava viewed the desecration of graveyards as part of the same strategy.

Asked how he believes the remaining Orthodox sacred sites in Kosovo can be protected, given that 114 churches have been destroyed or severely damaged since the international community took control of Kosovo in 1999, Fr Sava responded: "The true way to solve this problem is a new strategy which would use political pressure and give KFOR a robust military mandate, by which it would be possible to neutralise Albanian extremism, and also to condition further support to moderate Albanian political circles with assistance in the fight against their own extremism and violence."

In a 19 November statement from Gracanica monastery, the diocese put forward a new demand which it believed might help persuade Albanian-controlled municipalities to protect Serbian holy sites. “It is generally believed in the Serbian Orthodox Church that if Albanian-dominated municipalities were obliged to provide at least part of the financial support for the reconstruction of destroyed Serbian Orthodox Churches, extremists will have to think twice before they blow up the next church because they will burden their own community.”

But Fr Sava maintained that normal security measures must remain in place. “Our Church requests active defence of all of its temples, with deployment of adequate surveillance equipment and light which would discourage potential perpetrators.”  
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