

KOSOVO: MORE ATTACKS ON ORTHODOX GRAVEYARDS AND MONASTERIES

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 2 July 2002

As attacks continue on Serbian Orthodox sites in Kosovo, the Orthodox Church has again requested the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the NATO-led peacekeeping force KFOR to protect the remaining Serbian patrimonial sites according to their obligation set out in UN Security Council Resolution 1244. On 10 June more than 50 tombstones were found toppled and desecrated at the old Serbian Orthodox cemetery in Orahovac (Rrahovec in Albanian), near Prizren in western Kosovo. During the week of 16-23 June the monastery of the Pec (Peja) Patriarchate was stoned and nuns verbally abused several times by a large group of young Kosovo Albanians who gather daily in the vicinity. On 22 June, when the Orthodox priest and a group of parishioners visited the cemetery in Milosevo, 10 kilometres (6 miles) from Prizren, they found at least 70 tombstones desecrated, but were not able to establish when the desecration occurred.

“By tolerating the systematic desecration of Orthodox Christian sites in Kosovo and Metohija, the UN Mission and KFOR are seen as directly responsible for it in the eyes of the Serbian people and the Church,” Fr Sava (Janjic), a leading Serbian Orthodox monk in Kosovo, told Keston on 24 June. “The silence and even shameless denials by senior Kosovo Albanian officials, who accuse the Church of propaganda, serve to confirm the overtly antidemocratic and discriminatory orientation of the new Albanian-dominated institutions in Kosovo and Metohija and seriously discourage further Serbian participation.”

In the latest incident, an unexploded hand grenade was discovered outside the early twentieth century Church of St Nikola in Kamenica. KFOR spokesman Lt Col Gottfried Salchner declared in a statement on 28 June that a man had reported the discovery to the military police. “An EOD [explosive ordnance disposal] team was dispatched and a hand grenade was found. The EOD team removed the item and it will be disposed of at a later date.”

The Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Raska and Prizren told Keston that the grenade was found by Serbian children playing in the vicinity of the church. Parish priest Fr Nikola expressed his concern that the church is not under KFOR or police protection. The discovery of the grenade came shortly after the discovery that the Church of St Basil of Ostrog in Ljubovo, Istok municipality, had been raided. “During a routine patrol in Lubove/Ljubovo on the evening of 24 June 2002, a KFOR patrol discovered that someone had forced open the locked door of a church and caused damage to a wooden cross,” Lt Col Salchner declared in a KFOR statement on 26 June. “Investigations are ongoing.” A statement from the diocese reported that when all the local Serbs left Kosovo for Serbia in 1999, the church – which dates back to 1939 - was locked with some valuables remaining inside.

Since the arrival of KFOR in Kosovo, the remaining Serbian community in Orahovac has not been able to use the graveyard for security reasons, and has had to use land round the town’s church instead. This is no longer suitable as a burial site, so parish priest Fr Srdjan Milenkovic and the local Serbian community requested permission to

use the old cemetery again. On 10 June a three-member delegation visited the cemetery under KFOR protection and found “a large number of tombs damaged and desecrated”, according to a statement from the Serbian Raska and Prizren Diocese sent to Keston on 13 June. In its statement, the Serbian government’s Coordination Centre for Kosovo and Metohija said that the letters UCK – the Albanian abbreviation for the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) – were inscribed on many of the tombstones.

After a series of incidents over Easter, when Albanian youth threw stones into the Pec Patriarchate monastery yard (see KNS 31 May 2002), local Italian KFOR troops erected a two-metre (two-yard) high sandbag barrier above the existing stone wall around the yard in an attempt to prevent further attacks. Now the perpetrators can no longer see clearly inside, but it has been reported that young Albanians gather in large numbers close to the monastery in attempt to irritate the nuns and throw stones at the churches and at nuns crossing the yard. In the week of 16-23 June, the yard and the church roofs were peppered with stones at least five times. Late in the evening of 19 June, according to a monk based in the monastery, Fr Jovan, a group of nearly 100 Albanians gathered on the hill opposite the monastery and started making a loud noise.

A similar incident occurred in the monastery of Veliki Decani in the same period. “Last week, it was only thanks to the intervention of the local UN police and KFOR that an Albanian 'celebration party' was moved away from the vicinity of the monastery because they were playing loud KLA music and verbally abusing the monks,” abbot Teodosije told Keston on 23 June.

While visiting a cemetery in Milosevo on the annual Day of the Dead (22 June), for the first time in a year, local parish priest Fr Zoran Filipovic and a group of parishioners, escorted by KFOR, found at least 70 gravestones desecrated, and the eyes of the deceased on the photos on the tombstones gouged out. Fr Filipovic reported that only a few graves have not been damaged, according to a diocesan statement. A local parish sent a letter of protest to the UN administrator in the municipality of Obiliq (Obiliq) to which Milosevo belongs. Fr Filipovic was unable to say when the incidents occurred, only to report that on the same day last year the cemetery stood intact. On 24 June the Belgrade-based Tanjug news agency quoted the local UNMIK police spokesman Barry Fletcher as declaring that “this incident had not been reported to the UN mission yet”. Beta agency reported that, in addition to the desecration of tombstones, three monuments from the same cemetery were missing.

The Orthodox diocese is seriously concerned at the reports of all of these incidents because of the continuing pressure on its clergy, especially monks and nuns in Kosovo. Visiting one of the monasteries recently, Bishop Artemije (Radosavljevic) expressed his fear that all Serbian Orthodox cemeteries outside Serbian enclaves protected by KFOR might have been seriously damaged by the (presumably Albanian) perpetrators of these acts and by extremists. "This is a crime which will remain a dark shadow over the history of the Kosovo peacekeeping mission and a deep wound in the heart of our people," declared Bishop Artemije, in a letter sent to Keston on 13 June. (END)