

KOSOVO: RECONCILIATION WITH THE ORTHODOX AS ATTACKS CONTINUE

by Branko Bjelajac and Felix Corley, Keston News Service, 31 May 2002

Despite an official visit by the recently-elected Kosovo prime minister Bajram Rexhepi, the head of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) Michael Steiner and KFOR officials to the monastery at Pec (Peja in Albanian) for the Orthodox Easter service on Sunday, 5 May, violence against Orthodox nuns, monks and laypeople and Serbian graves continued over the Orthodox Easter season (see separate KNS article). "The prime minister's visit to take part in the prayers is the beginning of a reconciliation process," Rexhepi's chief advisor, Ramadan Audiu, told Keston News Service from Pristina on 31 May. "The prime minister met church leaders after the liturgy and the meeting was very friendly."

Gazmend Pula, chair of the Kosovo Helsinki Committee, welcomed Rexhepi's decision to go to the monastery, the first such visit since Kosovo gained an elected leadership in the wake of the conflict. "This marks a turning-point towards the Serbian community and its cultural and national institutions, including the church," he told Keston from Pristina on 31 May. "It indicates that the political establishment of Kosovo is making an effort to overcome the tensions and consequences generated by the war and the pre-war situation."

The Belgrade-based news agency Beta reported on 17 May that a few days earlier that Bishop Artemije (Radosavljevic) and prime minister Rexhepi, accompanied by UNMIK and United States and German officials, visited the village of Osojane (Osojan in Albanian), near the town of Istok (Istog) in western Kosovo. Osojane is a test village for Serbian returnees (see KNS October 2001). "One of the subjects was a continuance of the building of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Osojane," reports declared. After that, the visitors went to Zociste (Zozishte), an exclusively Albanian-populated village where a fourteenth century Orthodox monastery was destroyed in early 1999. The visit took place without the presence of the press, but the visit by Bishop Artemije was significant.

The Belgrade daily Politika reported on 19 May that UNMIK and the Albanian-founded Committee for the earthquake damage evaluation, has decided to reconstruct the Orthodox Church of St Nicholas in Gnjilane (Gjilan). The church was damaged in an earthquake that struck in April, killing three people and destroying several hundred houses, with thousands more suffering minor damage. (END)