

KOSOVO: GRENADE ATTACK ON PRISTINA'S LAST ACTIVE ORTHODOX CHURCH

by Branko Bjelajac, Keston News Service, 5 January 2001

The only functioning Serbian Orthodox church in the Kosovan capital Pristina was attacked with a hand grenade in the evening of 22 December. Unknown attackers threw the grenade at the Church of St Nicholas from a passing vehicle. No-one was injured, but windows were broken, a dividing wall between the church and the old graveyard was damaged and the outside wall of the church suffered minor damage. The 170-year-old icon screen, one of the most valuable in the whole Serbian Church, was not damaged. This is the first reported attack on an Orthodox church in Kosovo since September of last year.

St Nicholas' Church, built in 1830, serves the several hundred remaining Serbs in Pristina. It is the only active church, besides one under construction. It is guarded by British troops serving with the NATO-led peacekeeping force KFOR. Police from the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) have investigated the incident, interviewing people in the neighbourhood, but no-one has been arrested or charged so far. Keston News Service has been unable to get through to UNMIK to find out the results of the investigation. KFOR spokesman Captain Richard Kusak promised to respond to Keston's enquiry about what measures have been taken to prevent such attacks recurring.

'Father Miroslav, the only remaining local parish priest, reported that a vehicle came from a small side alley that runs up the hill. After it passed the KFOR tank unit at the entrance to the churchyard and reached the old graveyard, the attackers threw the grenade, which landed in front of the church,' Srdjan Jakovljevic, head of the diocesan office in Belgrade, told Keston on 3 January.

Jakovljevic believes the incident follows the pattern of earlier attacks on Orthodox churches in Kosovo. 'First they intimidate, then they come to loot and steal, then comes desecration of the holy sites and finally destruction, usually by dynamite.'

He regards the attack as 'a clear sign' to the remaining Serbs in Pristina, who have to travel to services in the church on Sundays and religious holidays in buses guarded by KFOR soldiers. 'We condemn this attack and the attackers, and again ask KFOR and UNMIK to find those responsible.'

Serbian Orthodox churches and graveyards in Kosovo have suffered waves of attacks since international peacekeeping forces entered the province in 1999 and about ninety have been damaged or completely destroyed. However, the number of serious attacks has fallen sharply in recent months. In the last reported attack, on 1 September, the Church of St Nicholas at the Orthodox cemetery in the village of Musnikovo, Sredacka Zupa, 10 miles south of Prizren, was damaged and desecrated (see KNS 11 September 2000). As far as Keston is aware, no-one has ever been tried and convicted for any of these attacks. (END)