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MACEDONIA: Serbian Orthodox Archbishop arrested again

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

Serbian Orthodox Archbishop Jovan has again been arrested by Macdonian police, along with four monks, seven nuns, and a theology student from Bulgaria currently studying in Greece, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The Archbishop and the monks and nuns have been held in jail, and the theology student has been deported and banned for two years from entering Macedonia. The latest arrests took place when police interrupted a church service, and appears to be linked to moves by some within the Macedonian Orthodox Church, including some monasteries, to be reconciled with the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Macedonian government has told Forum 18 that "entering spiritual and canonical unity with the Archbishopric of Ohrid", which the government claims is "non-existent in Macedonia", constitutes "the dissemination of religious hatred."

During a church service in Bitola, southern Macedonia, last Sunday (11 January), Macedonian police interrupted the service and arrested Archbishop Jovan (Vraniskovski) of the Serbian Orthodox Church, four monks, seven nuns, and a theology student from Bulgaria currently studying in Greece. The arrests took place in the apartment of Archbishop Jovan's father, where the service was taking place. The apartment had been adapted into a small chapel with the name "The Ascension of the Lord".

All those arrested were held in custody for 24 hours, and an investigative judge questioned them about what he described as the "alleged service". After his release, Archbishop Jovan was re-arrested and sentenced to 30 days "investigative detention" and, in what the Macedonian Interior Ministry described as a "protective measure", the Bulgarian student was deported and banned from entering Macedonia for two years.

The Deputy Public Prosecutor has charged Archbishop Jovan with "dissemination of national, racial and religious hatred, disorder and segregation" under article 319 of the Criminal Code. Mirjana Konteska, a spokeswoman of the Macedonian Interior Ministry, told Forum 18 from Skopje on 13 January that all 13 people arrested during the service were suspected of "spreading religious hatred", and that this was why investigative judge Slobodanka Bakevska ordered police to enter the premises and "detain the perpetrators". Speaking of those arrested, Konteska said that they "defended themselves by silence" and that the monks and nuns arrested "will be charged before the Magistrates court with disturbance of public peace and order."

"Among more than thirty people present in that apartment when police arrived, there were representatives of four monasteries in Macedonia which previously announced that they will enter spiritual and canonical unity with the Archbishopric of Ohrid," says Konteska of the Interior Ministry. "This was the grounds for a prosecutor to charge them with the dissemination of religious hatred. They were in the process of admitting these monks and nuns into the Archbishopric of Ohrid, which is non-existent in Macedonia."

Archbishop Jovan was put into solitary confinement last year for baptising a relative in an active Macedonian Orthodox Church (see F18News 24 July 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=113) On 31 October 2003 he was sentenced to one year in prison, suspended for two years on condition that he did not commit what the Macedonian authorities would consider to be further offences. The Interior Ministry spokeswoman told Forum 18 that during Archbishop Jovan's current detention "a judge will investigate whether this act is a repeat, in which case the two cases might be charged together."

Archbishop Jovan was a Bishop of the Macedonian Orthodox Church who responded to a call for re-union of the Macedonian and Serbian Orthodox Churches by Serbian Patriarch Pavle in 2002. Jovan was then installed as the Serbian Orthodox bishop and patriarchal exarch for all of the dioceses of the Ohrid archbishopric. The Macedonian Orthodox Church in 1958 responded to heavy pressure by the then government of Marshal Tito by gaining autonomy within the Serbian Orthodox Church. In 1968 the Macedonian Orthodox Church claimed autocephaly (complete independence from the Serbian Orthodox Church), also with very heavy interference by the then government, but no Orthodox Church in the world recognises this autocephaly.

The Serbian Orthodox Church has issued a strong condemnation of the renewed arrest of Archbishop Jovan, and has condemned the interference of the state with the religious freedom of clergy and believers.

"The real reason for his [Jovan's] arrest should be looked for in moves by half of the monastic population of Macedonia towards reconciliation with the Serbian Orthodox Church," Ana Kostic-Dimitrijevska of KIM Radio told Forum 18 from the Macedonian capital Skopje. "Three monasteries joined the Serbian Orthodox Church, some sources say four, and this was the reason for all of the upheaval in Macedonian Orthodox Church and Macedonian government."

When the names of the four monasteries were released, Macedonian Orthodox Bishop Timotej stated that "All churches and monasteries on the territory of Macedonia are part of the Macedonian Orthodox Church (...) Monks have free will to join anybody, but monasteries and their properties belong only to the Macedonian Orthodox Church." All hieromonks in charge of these monasteries were dismissed the same day and replaced by others, with the assistance of the uniformed police forces.

"When the police entered the apartment, they seized the Archbishop's mobile phone, PC and other personal communication devices" Fr. Nektarije of the Serbian Orthodox diocese of Raska and Prizren told Forum 18 from Gracanica (Kosovo) on 13 January 2004. Fr. Nektarije is a close friend of Archbishop Jovan. "The last time I was in contact with him, a day before arrest, he was aware that the troubles might arise again. In a previous year he was arrested for serving [the liturgy] in a church, this time they arrested him for serving [the liturgy] in a home that was adapted in a small chapel."

BETA news agency reported on 13 January 2004 that the Serbian Patriarch Pavle has written to the Macedonian President Boris Trajkovski (who is visiting Portugal) asking for an urgent meeting with him. However, the Macedonian government the same day issued the statement that "the preservation and defence of the autocephalous status and the entirety of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, defence of its name, which is directly linked to the national identity of the Macedonian people and the Macedonian state, is the strategic interest of the church, people, state and the Government. The Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Government stand behind these joint positions in defence of the integrity, identity and dignity for preservation of the Macedonian Orthodox Church's honour."

Despite police interrupting a service to arrest Bishop Jovan, Koneska of the Interior Ministry has insisted to Forum 18 that "it is not true that religious communities are not permitted to held religious services outside church buildings. This requirement has been banned," says Koneska "and there is no legal obstacle for clergy of other countries to enter Macedonia." In the past, numerous instances have been reported of Bulgarian, Greek and Serbian Orthodox clergy not being permitted to enter Macedonia in their priestly garments.

Earlier this year, Macedonian Prime Minister Branko Crvenkovski, stated that the government will soon adopt a new draft law for religious communities, and that the first draft had been evaluated by the Ministry of Justice.

A printer-friendly map of Macedonia is available from

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=macedo>

Note that the formally recognized name of Macedonia in international law is "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia".

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