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MACEDONIA: Orthodox Monk and Bishop fined, and another Bishop still jailed

By Branko Bjelajac, Forum 18

A Serbian Orthodox Bishop, Marko (Kimev), and a monk, Sasko Velkov, have been fined yesterday (27 January) for taking part in a baptism last July, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Another Bishop, Jovan (Vranisskovski), who conducted the baptism, is still in jail for his participation in a church service on 11 January at which Bishop Marko and other monks and nuns were also arrested by Macedonian police. Bishop Marko told Forum 18 that the arrest and sentencing of monks and nuns is "an obvious attempt to scare Macedonian Orthodox Church monks who desired to join the Serbian Orthodox Church". Both the Serbian and Greek Orthodox churches have asked the Macedonian government to release Bishop Jovan, who Amnesty International has described as being in jail for his "non-violent religious convictions". Macedonian officials have rejected these appeals.

Serbian Orthodox Bishop Marko (Kimev), with a monk Sasko Velkov, were fined 8,500 Macedonian Dinars each (1,198 Norwegian Kroner, 139 Euros, or 175 US Dollars) yesterday (27 January) by a magistrates court in Bitola, southern Macedonia, for participating in a baptism held on 20 July 2003 in St. Demeterios' Church in Bitola (see F18News 24 July 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=113). That service was broken up by police, on the instigation of priests of the Macedonian Orthodox Church.

The Macedonian Orthodox Church claimed autocephaly (complete independence) from the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1968, but no other Orthodox Church in the world recognises this autocephaly.

"This sentence is for last year's arrest, but I have not yet received it in a written form", Bishop Marko told Forum 18 from Bitola. "This year [in January], when Macedonian Orthodox Church monks came to join our liturgy, the Macedonian Orthodox Church panicked and called the police. We were all arrested for 'disturbance of the public peace', although we had been holding liturgies in that apartment for one and a half years. At that time they arrested Bishop Jovan (Vranisskovski) and myself, 2 hieromonks, one monk and seven nuns. We were held for 30 hours in jail without any explanation. Because they did not tell us why we were held, we defended ourselves with silence. After that, all of us were taken to an investigative judge, where we were told in writing that we were being taken into custody for 'disturbance of public peace and order'. Then we were released, except for Bishop Jovan who was sentenced to 30 days in prison, to 'prevent him escaping from justice'. He was charged with the severe criminal charges of 'dissemination of hatred on a religious or ethnic basis'.

Bishop Marko told Forum 18 that he and the monks and nuns who took part in the service in January were found not guilty of 'disturbing the peace', as the police were not able to prove that the singing of the liturgy was loud enough to require police intervention. He went on to describe the arrests and sentences as "an obvious attempt to scare Macedonian Orthodox Church monks who desired to join the Serbian Orthodox Church, thus entering canonical unity with the rest of the Orthodox world."

Bishop Jovan, of the Serbian Orthodox Church, conducted the baptism in July 2003, and he was last October sentenced to a year in jail, suspended for two years on condition that he did not commit any further "offences". The charge he was sentenced on was "self-elevation", because the Macedonian Orthodox Church does not recognise Bishop Jovan's ordination as a Bishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Bishop Jovan is currently in jail for 30 days "investigative detention", due to his participation in the church service on 11 January at which Bishop Marko and others were arrested. (See F18News 13 January http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=228).

Bishop Jovan is the Serbian Orthodox Church Metropolitan of Veles and Povardarje, and he is also Exarch for the Archbishopric of Ohrid. Bishop Marko has also recently been ordained as Bishop of Dremvica.

"No one has seen Bishop Jovan since his arrest, except for his lawyer," Bishop Marko told Forum 18. Bishop Jovan's lawyer says that the Bishop is doing well. He has appealed against his 20 July sentence to the High Court, and is awaiting its response.

Bishop Jovan appeared in court on 22 January and, according to the Skopje daily "Dnevnik", said that "This is a political chase in which the state and the court are involved. We have been convicted in advance, which is why we are not going to defend ourselves in court. The constitutional right of the church's separate status from the state has been violated. The police have been conducting searches in the houses of members and believers of the Ohrid Archbishopric. Religious and confessional rights in Macedonia are at the level of those in Saudi Arabia".

Both the Serbian and Greek Orthodox churches have asked the Macedonian government to release Bishop Jovan, and Amnesty International has described his detention as being because of his "non-violent religious convictions". Macedonian officials have rejected these appeals.

In an attempt to consolidate the position of the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC), the Macedonian parliament adopted on 23 January a declaration of support for the church which stated that "The parliament extends its strong support of and belief in all efforts and decisions of the MOC Holy Synod, as well as commitment to the need for preserving of the MOC integrity, significance, status and role in the social life of Macedonia. The parliament believes that the MOC Holy Synod will keep playing its historical role in preserving the Macedonian national identity and supports its efforts for acquiring the MOC status within the community of Orthodox churches and nations."

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 recognised name of Macedonia in international law is "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia".

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