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Violence against religious minorities continues

by Felix Corley

Forum 18 News Service (05.11.2004)/HRWF (06.11.2004) – Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - One year on from Georgia's "Rose Revolution" that saw the end of large-scale violence against religious minorities, some violent incidents and threats of violence are continuing, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. In mid-October the policeman in a village in Gurjaani district of eastern Georgia orally banned a local Baptist deacon from building a small home amid opposition to his presence by other villagers, who claim he will use the home to hold Baptist services. Two fellow Baptists helping him build the house were beaten at the end of October. Although violence has reduced, Lutherans, Pentecostals and other Protestants report lower-level violence or threats of violence and obstruction to their right to hold public worship services in the past two months.

Zurab Khutsishvili gained planning permission to build the house on land he owns in the village of Velitsikhe, Pastor Levan Akhalmosulishvili, a leading member of the independent Association of Christian-Baptist Churches, told Forum 18 from nearby Gurjaani on 3 November. "The policeman told Khutsishvili he would drive him out of the village." At the end of October, he reported, local villagers beat two fellow-Baptists who were helping Khutsishvili build his house.

Khutsishvili has been in charge of the village congregation of some 25 adult Baptists for the past four years. Akhalmosulishvili insists that Khutsishvili has the full right to build his house. "All the documents have been drawn up correctly and approved," he told Forum 18.

He claims the opposition is being stirred up by a local Orthodox priest, but the local Orthodox bishop categorically denied this. "I know about this case, but there were no excesses on the part of the Orthodox Church. I can assure you no priest was there," Bishop Ekvtime (Lejava) of Gurjaani and Velitsikhe told Forum 18 from Gurjaani on 5 November. "No-one was beaten – you've been given false information."

The bishop categorically denied that the Orthodox Church has been involved in any moves against religious minorities. "The Orthodox Church does not get involved." He said any citizen, whether Baptist, Muslim, Catholic or Hindu, can build their own house. He declined to say whether this meant that the Orthodox Church would allow religious minorities to build places of worship.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out from officials why the policeman threatened Khutsishvili and whether those who attacked the two Baptists will be prosecuted. Those who answered the telephone on 3 and 4 November at the Gurjaani district administration and at the district police declined to answer any questions or to give names or number of officials

responsible for the actions. Forum 18 was unable to reach anyone on 3 and 4 November at the Gurjaani district architectural bureau.

Akhalmosulishvili reported that as soon as Khutsishvili started to build the house neighbours stirred up by a young Orthodox priest Fr Avtandil called the police. The policeman arrived soon after to issue the threats. Akhalmosulishvili added that when the deacon was at the village administration to discuss the difficulties the young priest shouted at him: "Who gave you the right to build here? We won't allow you to."

Akhalmosulishvili says that other communities of the Association of Christian-Baptist Churches, one of three Baptist jurisdictions in Georgia, have faced similar opposition from local people which he claims has on occasion been stirred up by Orthodox priests.

At the end of October, a house in the village of Kuchatani in Kvareli [Qvareli] district of eastern Georgia used as a simple church for up to fifteen local Baptists was attacked twice in the night. "The first time the young lads broke the windows," Akhalmosulishvili reported, "the second time they came back and smashed the doors and furnishings inside." The church had only just been repaired when it was attacked. He said when the Baptists complained about the attacks to the local administrative head he denied any knowledge of them. "He knows very well," Akhalmosulishvili noted.

Kuchatani is only some 20 kilometres (12 miles) from the village of Akhalsopeli, where a Baptist church affiliated with the separate and larger Baptist Church of Georgia was burnt out by a mob allegedly incited by the local Orthodox priest Fr Bessarion Zurabashvili in June 2003.

"There has been no progress so far on rebuilding this church," Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, head of the Baptist Church of Georgia, told Forum 18 from the capital Tbilisi [T'bilisi] on 5 November. "The local priest is stirring up the villagers so we can't start the rebuilding." He said he had met the local Orthodox bishop who admitted he could not do anything to control the priest as the priest had backing "from Tbilisi".

Nikolai Kalutsky, pastor of a Russian-language congregation in Tbilisi, reported that on 12 September local residents again tried to halt the use of his home for his congregation to gather for a meal after it held its harvest festival service in the open air in a nearby forest. "Five local residents – the people who had been stirred up before by the Orthodox priest – shouted at us, saying they had warned us not to meet in my home, that they hated our faith and they wouldn't tolerate it," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 5 November. "Then they started to beat me, but I was able to escape and lock myself in the house."

Kalutsky reported that although the police came three times to his house in the wake of the threats and the beating, they begged him not to file an official statement about the incident.

He said the week before the harvest festival, the neighbours had not objected when the church had used the meeting room in his home for a wedding, the first service he had held undisturbed in his house for more than a year. In the past a vast mob used to gather on the street outside the house every time he tried to hold a service.

But Kalutsky reported some progress. On 18 October the Constitutional Court ruled that his rights had been violated when police banned the use of his home for worship services. "This is the only court which has ruled in favour of the rights of believers," he told Forum 18. He says he now has to take the ruling to the local police to ask them to defend him and his congregation next time they hold a service in his home.

Although other religious communities have not reported physical violence against them in recent months, several have complained of threats and intimidation. In early October, Lutheran Bishop Andreas Stoekl travelled to lead a service in the small church they have in the town of Bolnisi, south west of the capital. "They found a poster on the door of the

church declaring 'We do not want you here – leave this place!'," Songulashvili told Forum 18. He said the following Sunday the Lutherans found another poster with threats and the door of the church was deliberately damaged so badly that it could not be opened. "Although there was nothing direct, it is clear this was done at the inspiration of the Orthodox," Songulashvili insisted.

Songulashvili also complained of religious intolerance shown when the Vatican's nuncio in Georgia, Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, had been thrown out of Tbilisi's Orthodox cathedral, while Catholics in the mostly Catholic-populated village of Ivlita had got nowhere in their protests to local officials about what they regard as the vandalism to their village church, which is now in the hands of the Orthodox. "The local priest has concreted over the graves of Catholic missionaries inside the church to leave no trace of a Catholic presence," Songulashvili told Forum 18. "There is enormous tension. But when Catholic priest Fr Zurab tried to speak to the local governor, Niko Nikolovishvili, he was refused a meeting on about thirty occasions."

Pastor Georgi Chitadze of the Word of Life church in the town of Gori reported that their congregation in nearby Rustavi is still being denied the possibility of renting any public hall in the town for worship. "We asked again in mid-October and they told us again that halls are for cultural purposes, not for religious events," he told Forum 18 from Gori on 5 November.

While he maintained that life for Georgia's religious minorities has improved over the past year, Chitadze said local officials are still refusing to register the church's ownership of an office it bought in Gori three years ago. "There is an oral instruction not to register it, though we have paid all the fees and presented all the documents," he reported. "We have taken this up locally and nationally, but the authorities are afraid to help us. They're afraid religious violence will break out again."

Two communities that were subject to violence in the past, the True Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of Metropolitan Ephraim Spanos of Boston and the Jehovah's Witnesses, report no recent violence. "There has been no violence against us in the past year - it stopped with the change in power," Jehovah's Witness leader Genadi Gudadze told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 5 November. "We have held large congresses this year in private houses without the violent attacks we had in the past." A True Orthodox parishioner in Tbilisi told Forum 18 the same day that they too could meet for worship in private houses.

Akhalmosulishvili said the October attacks are the latest in a long-running series affecting congregations in his Baptist Association. "Last spring in a village in the Pankisi Gorge, a Baptist was invited by local people," Akhalmosulishvili told Forum 18. "When the Orthodox priest found out, he organised a mob of drunken men to drive out the Baptist. After the Baptist spoke to the men for an hour they told him if he didn't clear out he would leave as a corpse. He was nearly killed."

He said a local Baptist congregation was forced to move its meeting place in the village of Vanta in Telavi district in 2003 after the Orthodox priest stirred up the people against it.

"We still can't build churches," Akhalmosulishvili told Forum 18. "If we did so there would be a revolution." He says his Association has 14 congregations plus 20 smaller groups. In places where the Association does not have a building already, congregations have to meet in private homes.

"Orthodox priests never show themselves directly," Akhalmosulishvili claimed. "They do this through criminals or the police." He believes Orthodox priests are still acting against religious minorities, despite the change of regime in Georgia at the end of last year, when then-president Eduard Shevardnadze was ousted and Mikheil Saakashvili was elected president.

Source: <http://www.forum18.org>

Religious freedom survey

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (23.08.2004) / HRWF Int. (24.08.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -- As the first tentative legal steps are at last underway to bring to justice at least some of those responsible for a five year reign of terror on Georgia's religious minorities, some religious leaders have told Forum 18 News Service that the situation for religious minorities has improved since Mikheil Saakashvili led street protests that ousted President Eduard Shevardnadze last November and brought him to the presidency in January.

Others are not sure, insisting that although the atmosphere may have improved, the fundamental obstructions to their activity remain. They have told Forum 18 that religious minority communities are left without equal rights by, for example, the continued refusal to offer legal status to any faiths except the Georgian Orthodox Church, the lack of a religion law defining the rights of religious communities, the privileges still granted to the Orthodox Church in the controversial 2002 concordat, and the impossibility of building non-Orthodox places of worship.

"Is the religious freedom situation better? You can't answer this with a straight yes or no," Giorgi Khutsishvili, head of the Tbilisi [T'bilisi] International Centre on Conflict and Negotiation (ICCN), which has campaigned for an end to religious violence, told Forum 18 on 13 August. "The political atmosphere is easier than under Shevardnadze, and the government's attitude is clear: it's against extremism, for religious tolerance and in general for the European way of behaving. But at the same time the government believes it is very important for it to maintain good relations with the Orthodox Patriarchate."

Pastor Gary Azikov of the Lutheran Church was adamant that the situation had not improved. "Everything is as it was before the new government took over," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 13 August. "Nothing has moved forward." Bishop Giuseppe Pasotto of the Catholic Church also believes the problems for religious minorities have not been tackled as the new government has not yet devised a religious policy. "They have been busy working on other problems," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 13 August. A member of Tbilisi's Baha'i community who preferred not to be named echoed this point to Forum 18 the same day. "The government has been too preoccupied with the issue of Adjara and the conflict in South Ossetia to think about religious concerns."

"The situation is better," Pastor Mamuka Jebisashvili of the Word of Life church told Forum 18 from the capital Tbilisi on 13 August. He pointed out that his church was able to hold a youth conference in a rented Tbilisi theatre in May, an impossibility until this year, while in the town of Gori, where the Word of Life congregation faced repeated harassment in the past, "the fanatics have quietened down". Jehovah's Witness lawyer Manuchar Tsimintia agreed. "There have been no large-scale attacks," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 13 August. "We are continuing our activities and problems are gradually being worked out." This summer, he said, the Jehovah's Witnesses have been able to hold large conventions without violent attacks from self-appointed Orthodox vigilantes. "This is the first year we have been able to do this for five years."

More pessimistic is Fr Zurab Aroshvili, a priest of the True Orthodox Church which is under the authority of Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston in the United States. "There have been no new developments on religious freedom," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 13 August. "There has been no progress in being able to build churches." He said that when their parish in the western city of Kutaisi [Kut'ai'si] applied for permission to build a church, officials told

them to seek permission from the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate, as prescribed in the 2002 concordat between the Patriarchate and the government. "Officials won't give permission," he complained. "Even Kutaisi regional court would not give us the permission. The authorities tell our priest there Fr David Georgadze that they understand our plight, but officials say without Patriarchate approval we can't give you permission, otherwise we would lose our jobs." He said approaches to the city authorities this year have brought the same response.

Fr Aroshvili also said that there had been no progress on rebuilding the church in the village of Shemokmedi, destroyed by a self-appointed Orthodox mob in October 2002. No-one has been prosecuted for this. "The old authorities are still there," he told Forum 18. "The building is still in ruins and if we try to rebuild it we fear they will simply come again and destroy it."

The True Orthodox parish in Tbilisi would also like to build its own church when it has the money, in accordance with plans approved by the city council in 1998. "Although activists from the Liberty Institute supported us under the old government," Fr Aroshvili reported, "now they are close to the new rulers we don't know how they would react if we sent in an application to start building." He said that the five True Orthodox parishes can meet for worship in private homes but, despite the change in government, having full-fledged churches is still a long way off. "The authorities and the people don't object any more to home services, but having a proper church is a different matter – they won't give you permission as this is a matter for the Patriarchate."

Pastor Azikov of the Lutheran Church also said that building churches was still a problem, as Lutherans cannot build new churches, and so two of the five Lutheran congregations in the country are therefore forced to meet in private homes, while another congregation rents accommodation in a museum. "Of course these communities want their own churches."

Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, head of the Baptist Church of Georgia, told Forum 18 that his congregation in the village of Akhalsopeli in Kvareli [Qvareli] district of eastern Georgia still faces threats from the local population not to rebuild their church. This was burnt out by a mob allegedly incited by the local Orthodox priest Fr Bessarion Zurabashvili in June 2003. "The local authorities didn't want to be involved, so they kept shuffling responsibility from one office to another," Bishop Songulashvili told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 13 August. "Finally the architect's office gave permission in July to rebuild." But he said the Orthodox priest is still there and described the continuing threats as "an alarming signal".

Bishop Songulashvili's concern was echoed by Khutsishvili of the ICCN, which had visited the village in the previous few days. "There is an official decision allowing the church to be restored, but the local Orthodox have pledged to prevent this happening," he told Forum 18. "Our group spoke to the Orthodox and they were categorical. They also said they will not tolerate what they see as any Baptist proselytism." He said that building non-Orthodox places of worship is "not entirely prohibited", but faces strong resistance from the Orthodox, and he is not aware of any non-Orthodox places of worship opening in Georgia in 2004. "Even the Catholics, perhaps the strongest of the non-Orthodox faiths, face lots of resistance to opening new churches," he told Forum 18. "When Orthodox priests are behind a decision, the government won't intervene." He points out that many minority faiths that do have their own places of worship are still too frightened to put up a sign outside.

Bishop Songulashvili says that the Baptists would like to build churches, including in several villages in the Kakheti region of eastern Georgia. "But when we try, nothing happens," he lamented. "Orthodox priests have such influence on local authorities that there is no point for us to apply for permission to build churches." He says the only way is for private individuals to buy a building and convert it into a church. "This has been the pattern for the past twelve years. Nothing has changed," going on to comment that until a law on religion is adopted (Georgia is the only country in the former Soviet Union without one), or there is

some other way for non-Orthodox religious communities to gain legal status, it will remain impossible to build places of worship. "Without legal status we don't exist in law."

Bishop Pasotto of the Catholic Church echoed Bishop Songulashvili's comments, saying that "without a religion law we can't build churches, though I admit we haven't tried again this year," he told Forum 18. "I don't think the problems are with the government though. It is more a problem of social attitudes."

Despite this, Bishop Songulashvili believes Orthodox influence over the government has faded. "The Orthodox complain their influence has fallen, and this is true." Khutsishvili of the ICCN believes that President Saakashvili's government is determined to work on the basis of the rule of law. "It is listening less to extremists like the politician Guram Sharadze, who kept inciting people against religious minorities."

However, some of President Mikheil Saakashvili's views have caused concern. Following the 12 March police arrest of Old Calendarist priest Fr Basil Mkalavishvili and his associates, responsible for a five-year reign of terror against religious minorities, Saakashvili said, in remarks broadcast on Imedi TV, that "the Georgian state, not some local extremist who beats and raids people, should protect Georgia from harmful alien influence and extremism". Amnesty International believes such a comment "clearly contravenes" Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees the right to choose and practise one's faith freely.

At the time of his becoming President in November 2003, some religious leaders also expressed scepticism about President Saakashvili's commitment to religious freedom, pointing out that he was minister of Justice at a time when many violent attacks were being made on religious minorities.

On 10 May 2004, President Saakashvili made comments which cast further doubt on his commitment to religious freedom. When Saakashvili visited a mosque in the port city of Batumi [Bat'umi], he said, according to Caucasus Press, that there are two main traditional religions in Georgia, Christianity and Islam, and went on to say that the country must be cleared from the harmful influence of aggressive religious movements.

Although there have been no large-scale attacks on religious minorities since President Shevardnadze was ousted, many religious leaders are disturbed by continuing intolerance against any manifestation of religious freedom, as well as opposition to the building non-Georgian Patriarchate places of worship. Fr Aroshvili of the True Orthodox complained that, at the end of May, people from the Patriarchate warned the owner of a bookshop, on Tbilisi's central Rustaveli Avenue, to remove from sale books published by the True Orthodox Church. The owner "feared aggression if he failed to comply, so my brother Fr Gela had to come and take the books away." Although booksellers often do stock non-Patriarchate religious publications, many believe this remains risky. "There is still Orthodox intimidation of bookshops that sell non-Patriarchate material," Khutsishvili of the ICCN reported.

As a further sign of intolerance, Khutsishvili told Forum 18 of the recent vandalism of Catholic graves in Georgia's southern Javakheti region.

Examples of intolerance were also given by Bishop Songulashvili, who spoke of a June 2004 attack by one Orthodox priest, Fr David Kvlividze, on another priest, Fr Georgi Chachava, for his "liberal" views and readiness to work with other Christian churches. Another example was a telephone call in June from the Patriarchate to St Panteleimon's Orthodox Church in Tbilisi, instructing the priest to close the church for a day to "cleanse" it after it had been "desecrated" by a visit to the Sunday liturgy by a delegation from the Church of England Diocese of Norwich, described by the caller as "dogs". Church of England Bishop Stephen Platten of Wakefield told the Anglican 'Church Times' (20 August 2004) that he had discussed this incident with Prime Minister Zurab Jvania, who was "amazed that anyone

could be quite so crude", as well as with Patriarch Ilya, who Bishop Platten described as "a godly, kindly patrician figure, but tired and surrounded by the ecclesiastical apparatchiks of a fallen and discredited empire."

Bishop Songulashvili was also outraged by the instruction in June by an Orthodox priest at the Sveti Tskhoveli Cathedral in the ancient capital of Georgia, Mtskheta, in western central Georgia, to another church official to throw out the Vatican nuncio to Georgia, Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, who was visiting the ancient cathedral. "The cathedral is a UNESCO world heritage site and gets public money," Songulashvili told Forum 18. "They had no right to kick him out. This was simply a sign of religious intolerance."

Pentecostal pastor Nikolai Kalutsky, whose Tbilisi home was repeatedly blockaded and attacked in recent years by self-appointed vigilantes, led by local Orthodox priest Fr David Imnadze, to prevent worship services taking place there, told Forum 18 that the Constitutional Court still has not ruled on whether he has the right to host religious services in his home. "I expect them to tell me in the next week when the hearing will take place," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 14 August. He took his case to the court after the local police banned him from using his home for services. Kalutsky said he has not tried to hold services in his home this year, despite the change in government. "The ban is against the constitution, but I am law abiding and want to have the verdict from the court to take to the local police, to guarantee that the excesses we saw in the past won't be repeated." In the winter his church meets in a private home in an area of Tbilisi where, in his words, the population is "more friendly", while in summer it meets in the forest close to the city.

Pastor Kalutsky believes that it is now possible for religious minorities to print religious literature locally, though he says there is still a risk that any literature might be destroyed by "fanatics". "We don't yet have a 100 per cent guarantee that it is safe." Pastor Azikov of the Lutheran Church pointed out that without legal status, non-Orthodox communities have no right to publish, saying his Church therefore "is not risking it". Pastor Jebisashvili of Word of Life said it is now easier to print literature, as did Catholic Bishop Pasotto. Bishop Songulashvili of the Baptists says his Church has never had a problem producing literature locally. However, the Baha'i representative told Forum 18 that publishing is "not very easy", adding: "Some companies are not happy to print our material – they have only limited understanding. Plus they are afraid that if the government finds out they might have problems."

Most religious leaders said they were optimistic that the new Education Minister, Kakha Lomaia, was making an honest attempt to turn religious education in schools into an informational subject, rather than Orthodox instruction. "I believe the education minister is a good person who wants to change the religious education lessons to include non-Orthodox faiths fairly," Pastor Jebisashvili told Forum 18. But Bishop Songulashvili lamented that there is still "no clarity" on the issue. "We do not need religious instruction in schools, what we need is religious education." He welcomed a conference at the end of July with education ministry officials, educationalists and non-governmental organisations to look at different models of religious education and European standards of how to teach it.

Khutsishvili said that the ICCN was working with another NGO in Tbilisi, the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, on a project to draw up new teaching materials "that teach religions as they are, not as the Orthodox see them". He says some "enlightened" schools are already "correcting" the syllabus, but that Orthodox instruction still occurs, especially in rural schools. Not all schools introduced religious education classes. "I would say about half the schools in Tbilisi have these classes," the Baha'i representative told Forum 18. Compulsory class visits to local Orthodox churches seem to be declining. "My eight-year old daughter was taken several times last year to church to be told how to pray," the Baha'i noted. "But at a different school this year they have never been taken. As time goes on, schools and teachers try to be more tolerant."

Jehovah's Witness lawyer Manuchar Tsimintia said that he had not heard recently of any teachers making Jehovah's Witness children go to local Orthodox churches in school time. "But I don't think the syllabus has yet been officially changed," he told Forum 18. He also said that he had not heard of any cases in 2004 of Jehovah's Witnesses being sacked from their job as teachers, as had happened in previous years.

All religious leaders spoke of the need to have the possibility to register religious communities, either through a new law or through an amendment to the public law code. Bishop Songulashvili gave the current inability of non-Georgian Patriarchate communities to build places of worship as an example of the need for a religion law, saying that "without legal status we don't exist in law." Although religious leaders said they had looked at draft religion laws circulated recently, Bishop Songulashvili complained of the lack of clarity. He said that Foreign Minister Salome Zourabichvili had recently told him and the visiting Bishop of Wakefield, Stephen Platten, that a draft text will be issued for comments before going to parliament in the autumn. However, only the following day both the deputy Justice Minister Giorgi Papuashvili and Prime Minister Zurab Jvania told them no draft text was under discussion.

"Prime Minister Jvania supported the idea of amending the public law code to allow religious organisations to register," Bishop Songulashvili told Forum 18. "I think this is not a bad idea. Let religious communities get registration and later adopt a religious law if needed." One recent improvement is that, in November 2003, the Ministry of Justice restored state registration to the Jehovah's Witnesses. This had been removed after the extremist politician Guram Sharadze, with the backing of the Georgian Patriarchate, initiated a 1999 legal case for annulment of the Jehovah's Witnesses' registration, alleging their "anti-State, anti-national, and anti-Orthodox activity".

Bishop Songulashvili believes religious communities have three main needs: to be able to obtain legal status, acquire the right to engage in social ministry and educate their followers in schools and in their own colleges. "If any draft law meets these three needs, we will be happy."

Source: <http://www.forum18.org>

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Will violent attackers of religious minorities be punished?

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (16.08.2004) / HRWF Int. (24.08.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -- Jehovah's Witnesses have expressed cautious optimism over the preliminary hearing on 13 August of a group of violent self-appointed Orthodox vigilantes who terrorised religious minorities in recent years. As Old Calendarist priest Fr Basil Mkalavishvili, one of his main henchmen Petre Ivanidze and six others sat in a cage in the Tbilisi [T'bilisi] Vake-Saburtalo courtroom for the hearing, Judge Tabatadze rejected Mkalavishvili's appeal to be freed pending the trial. "This and other cases now underway show that, if we're honest, there is some progress," Jehovah's Witness lawyer Manuchar Tsimintia told Forum 18 News Service from the Georgian capital on 13 August. "I was there in court and, unlike in earlier hearings, there were no great crowds of Mkalavishvili's supporters – only a handful turned out." He said the full trial is now likely to begin in September.

Tsimintia added that the judge ruled that the cases over the attacks on the Jehovah's Witnesses and on the Baptists should be combined into one case.

Mkalavishvili and eight associates were arrested on 12 March when police stormed his church in the Gldani district of Tbilisi in a blaze of publicity. One of those arrested was later freed.

Mkalavishvili had organised and led a series of raids since 1999 on minority faiths. His example was soon followed by others, including members of the Jvari (Cross) organisation, led by Paata Bluashvili from the industrial town of Rustavi near Tbilisi. Religious minorities alleged to Forum 18 that individual parish priests and even some leading officials of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate participated in violent assaults on religious minorities or threats against them. Among those who suffered in the five-year reign of terror were Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, True Orthodox and Catholics.

Tsimintia declined to comment on the 5 April decision by the appeal chamber for criminal cases of Tbilisi district court to halve the suspended sentences on leading members of the Jvari organisation. There was outrage among human rights activists and religious minorities last November, when Rustavi city court gave Bluashvili and four associates - Mamuka Chubabria, Alexander Abzianidze, Besik Tskhovrebadze and Zaal Kevanishvili - only suspended sentences after being found guilty of conducting seven violent attacks on Jehovah's Witness meetings in Rustavi and Marneuli that left dozens of people wounded.

However, the April decision to uphold the lesser charges but to acquit three of them of charges under one of the articles of the criminal code (Article 187, which punishes "damage or destruction of property") and to reduce the sentences from four to two years for three of the guilty and from two years to one year for two of them seems to have gone unremarked in Georgia. "The prosecutor didn't stand firm, but supported the reduction in sentences," Tsimintia, who defended the victims in the case, told Forum 18. "I don't know why."

He was keen to stress that other criminal cases are underway against those who took part in the reign of terror against religious minorities. He said Bluashvili is also on trial in Gori district court for his involvement in attacks on Jehovah's Witness conventions in Kaspi and Gori. "Hearings started a month ago and were adjourned. I don't know when they will resume." Tsimintia regretted that of the many people involved in the attacks, only Bluashvili is being tried. "The investigators claim they don't know who the other attackers are."

He added that an associate of Mkalavishvili, Revaz Basilashvili, went on trial at Marneuli district court at the beginning of August for his part in attacks on a Jehovah's Witness congress in Marneuli in September 2001. Again, only one individual is on trial although many participated in the attack. "The prosecutor did not follow up the others," Tsimintia notes.

To Tsimintia, the most important progress for the Jehovah's Witnesses since Mikheil Saakashvili and his supporters ousted the previous president Eduard Shevardnadze from power last November is that large-scale violent attacks on their meetings have stopped. Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, head of the Baptist Church in Georgia which also suffered from Mkalavishvili's attacks, agreed that this represented progress. "There have been no serious assaults by extremists under the new government," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 13 August.

While religious minority leaders recognise this progress, they are sceptical that the courts will hand down appropriate sentences to punish those guilty of the violence. Asked if Mkalavishvili is likely ever to be sentenced to a prison term, Bishop Songulashvili was not very optimistic. "It depends on the political will," he declared. "There is no evidence that the political will is there at the moment."

His pessimism was shared by Giorgi Khutsishvili of the Tbilisi-based International Centre on Conflict and Negotiation, which has campaigned for an end to religious violence.

"Mkalavishvili was arrested very noisily in March, but since then the investigation has gone on very quietly," he told Forum 18 on 13 August.

He believes the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate allowed the authorities to arrest Mkalavishvili because he was "outside the Patriarchate" (it had defrocked him in 1996 and Mkalavishvili is now under the jurisdiction of Greek Old Calendarist bishop Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili). Khutsishvili believes the new government made a secret agreement with the Patriarchate allowing the authorities to arrest Mkalavishvili and close down his church.

Fr Zurab Aroshvili, a Tbilisi-based True Orthodox priest in the jurisdiction of Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston, said that since the new government took power, no-one has been prosecuted for the mob attack which destroyed their church in the village of Shemokmedi near Ozurgeti in south-western Georgia in October 2002. "The authorities maintain that a criminal case is underway, but the prosecutors say there is no case," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 13 August. "I don't believe anyone will ever be punished for this."

Pastor Nikolai Kalutsky, who leads a Russian-language Pentecostal congregation, also reported that there has been no attempt to prosecute the local Orthodox priest who organised mob demonstrations every time he tried to hold services in a prayer room attached to his home. Nor have any participants in the protests been charged.

"Those who violently invaded my property and beat my wife, my son and me have in objective terms violated the criminal code," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 14 August. He believes that although the authorities should have taken action against them, "as a Christian" he does not want to take them to court. "I simply want the authorities to calm them down."

Source: <http://www.forum18.org>

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Dr. Paul Crego's testimony before the CSCE

CSCE (21.07.2004) / HRWF Int. (27.07.2004) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net -- In July 21, 2004 the US Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe held a briefing about religious freedom in the Caucasus. We are presenting you the testimony delivered to the CSCE by Dr. Paul Crego, Cataloging Specialist at the Library of Congress.

I have recently returned from a two-week stay in the Republic of Georgia, where my primary task was to obtain religious periodical literature, in part to augment what I had collected in October 2002. I was able to collect more than forty titles, mainly available for sale on the main streets of Tbilisi.

In the several years of its independence, the new Republic of Georgia has experienced a series of conflicts. Political battles [including the removal of two sitting presidents], ethnic strife [particularly in South Ossetia and Abkhazia], severe economic hardships, and interference by imperial powers have beset the Georgian nation. Despite these conflicts many have worked for the establishment of a civil society and a democratic state in which basic human rights, including the freedom of religion, are recognized and encouraged.

During this time period religious freedom has been a concept that has sometimes been more a matter of lip service than reality. The dominant Georgian Orthodox Church is still working to fix its place in the new definition of nation; a striving that has been complicated by internal dissension, schisms, and the variety of other religions and Christian denominations, some historical present in Georgia and some not.

At the present time one must also ask what the new government, born of the Rose Revolution in November 2003, and headed by President Mikhail Saakashvili, Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania, and Parliament Speaker Nino Burjanadze, means for the development of human rights, and specifically for the principles and practice of religious freedom.

The new government has given some mixed signals. The arrest and detention of Fr. Basil Mkalavishvili in March, defrocked priest relating to schismatic Greek Old Calendarists, was a sure sign of progress. His campaign of physical violence and intimidation against non-Orthodox, especially Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, and Baptists, and his impunity during Shevardnadze's presidency was sure evidence that Georgian society had some way to go to match its self-claims of tolerance. If it were only the schismatic followers of Fr. Basil who promoted violence with their actions and rhetoric, we would be looking now more hopefully for a time of peaceful religious co-existence. Priests of the Georgian Orthodox Church, however, have sometimes participated in violent activity and such an incident occurred during the first week of my visit in Georgia after some Orthodox Christians had called on the Patriarch and the Church to move out of its isolation into a broader participation in the ecumenical movement. At the same time, I was encouraged by Mother Theodora, Abbess of the convent at the Cathedral of Bodbe in Kakhetia [East Georgia], that I do not consider the fanatics as representative of the Georgian Church.

Saakashvili, in his inaugural speech and elsewhere, has promoted the idea that Georgia's primary identity as a Christian nation makes it a part of Europe and European civilization. "...at the same time let the return to our rightful place, lost several centuries ago, to the European family, to European civilization, not be forgotten. As a country of a very old Christian civilization we will most certainly return to this place." Two flags fly now in the Republic of Georgia: the new explicitly Christian five-cross flag and the multi-starred flag of the European Union. Saakashvili makes reference to the European flag in his inaugural address. This new Georgian flag already leaves out Jews and Muslims. Significantly, Saakashvili does not refer specifically to Orthodox Christianity when he speaks of the ancient Christian civilization to which Georgia belongs, in a sense finessing the issue as to how "European" Orthodox Christian nations have been or are now.

Among the hopeful signs under the new government is the creation of a Human Rights Council announced by Saakashvili on 19 July to monitor human rights violations in Georgia and to report to him directly in a monthly meeting. The jury is really still out on whether the practice of the Saakashvili government can meet its talk in the area of human rights, including religious freedom. Perhaps we will learn more if the Georgian Parliament works on legislation concerning religion.

The rehabilitation of Georgia's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, in which Saakashvili has participated, also has implications for the practice of religious tolerance in the Republic of Georgia. Gamsakhurdia, although his self-proclaimed Orthodoxy was overlaid with the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, promoted a distinct program of Orthodox Church-Georgian State cooperation in such spheres as education. It is interesting that "Steinerism" has come under attack in Madli [Grace], the monthly newspaper of the Georgian Patriarchate. In any event, Gamsakhurdia's "Georgia for the Georgians" ideology included, for the most part, an insistence on Orthodoxy as a part of Georgian identity.

Baptist Bishop Malkhaz Songhulashvili, with whom I talked while in Georgia, expressed his concern over Gamsakhurdia's rehabilitation. He is quite convinced that the current government's profession of democratic principles and the upholding of human rights are contradicted by Gamsakhurdia's rehabilitation.

The most intolerant strains of Orthodoxy claim Zviad Gamsakhurdia as their own. One small religious magazine, in particular, called Metexi, has articles by and about Gamsakhurdia, and also articles on the Jewish-Masonic conspiracy that runs the world. It is likely that this magazine represents a small number of people. One could also have made the same claim for Fr. Basil and his thugs, yet it always appeared that this small number of people must have been representing some very powerful people. Gamsakhurdia himself was a lesson in

how we should have paid closer attention to some of the more "offbeat" religious ideas of a would be national leader. It should also be noted that such "conspiracies" against Orthodoxy and true religion are not just in the unsanctioned publications. Eldar Nadiradze, whose book "Who are the Jehovah's Witnesses and How Do They Do Battle Against Orthodoxy" puts the Jehovah's Witnesses in the context of a Masonic conspiracy, has the imprimatur of Metropolitan Anania Japaridze, the house historian among the hierarchs of the Georgian.

Attention to the internal debates within the Georgian Orthodox Church itself are also important as the future of religious tolerance in the Republic of Georgia is assessed. The current Patriarch, Ilia II, has continually lobbied for the preeminence of the Georgian Orthodox Church within the country. The Concordat of October 2002 is testimony to this. Ilia has been pressured, and has sometimes given into the pressure, of conservatives within the Church. The exit of the Georgian Orthodox Church from various ecumenical bodies in 1997 is an example of the latter. Some have given him the benefit of the doubt on this and related matters. A reading of Ilia's writings, however, would indicate that he is perhaps more on the side of the conservatives and not completely comfortable with the norms of "western" democratic freedoms. He is fearful of the moral and ethical implications of what he considers to be unbridled freedoms. The Patriarchate openly urges suppression of those "sects" and movements that are not "historical" to Georgia. [The historical list in Georgia: Orthodoxy, Armenian Church, Islam, Judaism, Baptists, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics.] This is done, to some extent, on theological grounds, but also on the premise that non-Orthodox [whether historically Georgian, or not] put the identity of the Georgian nation at risk. This is especially true when the Jehovah's Witnesses are under consideration; this criticism is also to be kept in mind when the difficult relations between the Georgian Orthodox Church and Roman Catholicism are under consideration. The Patriarch has also been quite outspoken in support of the idea that Abkhazia is historically an "inseparable" part of Georgia.

The Church as a repository of nationalism is something that is quite noticeable these days. Nowhere was it more visible than in the Church of St. Tamar, under construction on Dolidze St. in Tbilisi. While the fresco program awaits its execution, there are several icons with collections of national saints: most notable were the icon of Georgian ruler-saints [mep'eni] and the icon of Georgian queen-saints [dedisup'alni]. Copies of these icons are found in other churches as well.

I made two other observations in the context of religion and nationality while in Tbilisi this year: 1. The Polish inscription is no longer on the cornerstone on the Roman Catholic Church of the Holy Trinity; 2. The sign on the Baptist Church in four languages [Georgian, Armenian, Ossetian, and Russian] is no longer there. My assumption is that these churches do not want to advertise their "foreign" connections.

The struggle for the soul of the Georgian Church between those who desire a more open church and those who want to continue and strengthen its isolation will likely become more intense in the near future. The Patriarch's age means that people will be handicapping the election for his successor. While the contest for the Bishopric of Rome cautions us not to make too many assumptions about the longevity of the incumbent, the jockeying for position can still be instructive. Those who have been described as "fundamentalists" [a term used by Baptist Bishop Malkhaz] would promote less tolerance and would take it upon themselves in the future, as they have in the past, to suppress, sometimes violently, other religions. Others such as Archpriest Basil Kobakhidze are outspoken in their calls for more discussion and promotion from within the church of such issues as religious freedom and a democratic and pluralist society.

Conclusions: Saakashvili wants Georgia to appear tolerant to the West. He knows that this is necessary for both political and financial reasons. Fr. Basil's detention is certainly in support of this. Does he believe other matters are off the "radar screen?" Perhaps. It is too early to give a firm answer. More important, I believe, is the struggle within the Georgian Orthodox Church itself and among its future leaders and this in the context of how the Church continues to insist that it is a primary denominator of national identity.

Commission leaders welcome arrest of caustic Georgian cleric

Shift in rule-of-law follows revolution of the roses

Helsinki Commission News (24.03.2004) / HRWF Int. (25.03.2004) Email: info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- United States Helsinki Commission Chairman Rep. Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ) and Commission Co-Chairman Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell (R-CO) today welcomed positive developments in the Republic of Georgia where authorities arrested Basili Mkalavishvili, a defrocked Orthodox priest, for his agitation of violence against members of minority religions.

On Friday, March 12th, authorities arrested Mkalavishvili, along with a number of his followers, enforcing a June 2003 Tbilisi court order to take Mkalavishvili into preventive detention.

"This is a bright day for the rule of law in Georgia, and I thank President Mikheil Saakashvili's administration for taking this courageous step," said Chairman Smith. "I hope this represents the beginning of the end of mob violence against minority religious communities. I'll have greater confidence when Georgian officials investigate and prosecute others, such as Paata Bluashvili who is known to have perpetrated violent criminal acts against religious minorities."

"Members of the Helsinki Commission have repeatedly called upon the Georgian Government over the past four years to take action against Mkalavishvili and other mob leaders," said Co-Chairman Campbell. "This is good news, and I urge the authorities to vigorously prosecute Mkalavishvili and his collaborators in trials which adhere to international norms."

In a closed hearing in June 2003, the Vake-Saburtalo district court ordered authorities to take Mkalavishvili into preventive detention for his well-documented involvement in numerous mob attacks. The court hearing concerned the February 2002 attack, aired on local television, led by Mkalavishvili on a Baptist warehouse and the subsequent burning of Bibles stored in the facility. A separate long-running case against Mkalavishvili and others is pending for their involvement in three attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses.

Since 1999, several non-Georgian Orthodox religious groups have been the subject of violent mob attacks, usually led by Mkalavishvili, Bluashvili or their followers. Baptists, Catholics, Pentecostals and especially Jehovah's Witnesses have been repeatedly targeted for assault.

Members of the Helsinki Commission have repeatedly spoken out against the violence and lack of legal action under the previous government; however, in a recent letter to President Saakashvili, seven Members of the Commission expressed their eagerness to assist in establishing the rule of law on the heels of the recent revolution.

The Helsinki Commission maintains on its Internet site a detailed list of activities concerning freedom of religion and issues related to the Republic of Georgia.

The United States Helsinki Commission, an independent federal agency, by law monitors and encourages progress in implementing provisions of the Helsinki Accords. The

Commission, created in 1976, is composed of nine Senators, nine Representatives and one official each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce.

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Will violent Old Calendarist priest now be punished?

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (17.03.2004) / HRWF Int. (18.03.2004) Email: info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- Violent Old Calendarist priest Fr Basil Mkalavishvili could soon be in the dock after he and his key associates were seized when police stormed his church in the capital Tbilisi on 12 March. Mkalavishvili and seven associates are now in three-month pre-trial detention. Baptist Alexei Ordjonikidze, who witnessed Mkalavishvili ordering his supporters to beat his fellow Baptists and burn all the Bible Society literature in their lorry in 2002, told Forum 18 News Service that under the law Mkalavishvili should get at least seven years in prison. Human rights activist Levan Ramishvili believes the end of the reign of terror against religious minorities is one step closer. "When he and his colleagues are convicted by a court, a line will be drawn." He believes Mkalavishvili might do a deal with the court to reduce his sentence by naming those in the old government who might have sponsored his violent campaign. No priests of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate alleged by religious minorities to have organised similar attacks have been arrested.

Victims of violent Old Calendarist priest Fr Basil Mkalavishvili during his four-year-long reign of terror against Georgia's religious minorities have welcomed his 12 March detention, together with seven alleged associates – including Petre Ivanidze. "According to the law, Mkalavishvili and his associates should get at least seven or eight years in prison," declared Alexei Ordjonikidze, a Baptist who watched in horror in March 2002 as Mkalavishvili and his associates stopped their lorry, beat his colleagues, then burnt the Bible Society literature the lorry contained. "Mkalavishvili didn't conduct the beatings himself, but he organised the group and issued instructions as to who they should beat. Ivanidze was particularly bad," Ordjonikidze told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Tbilisi on 17 March. "They didn't beat me because of my age."

"The Baptist Church of Georgia shares the satisfaction of the rest of the progressive-minded population who were delighted to hear of Mkalavishvili's arrest," Baptist leader Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 17 March. He said this was not out of feelings of revenge, but out of the "enormous need" for the country to see that justice is being restored. He reported that television stations have been replaying the video of Mkalavishvili's attack on a Baptist warehouse in 2002, during which Bible Society books – including Bibles – were burnt. "The film shows Mkalavishvili directing the mob to burn the books and issuing instructions."

Also welcoming the move was Jehovah's Witness lawyer Manuchar Tsimintia. "Mkalavishvili and his associates should have been arrested and sentenced a long time ago," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 17 March. "I can't say why it wasn't done before." The Jehovah's Witnesses were particularly targeted in dozens of raids led by Mkalavishvili, with believers being beaten, meeting places wrecked and their literature burnt. Mkalavishvili and his followers often recorded their attacks on video and proudly sent them to local television stations.

Levan Ramishvili, the head of the Liberty Institute, a human rights group in Tbilisi which was attacked in July 2002 by other self-appointed vigilantes in retaliation for its work for religious freedom and human rights, said Mkalavishvili's detention brings the end of the era of religious violence in Georgia one step closer. "When he and his colleagues are convicted

by a court, a line will be drawn and a page of history will be closed," he told Forum 18 on 17 March. He said his eventual conviction would serve a dual purpose: to punish Mkalavishvili and to be an important symbol to restrain others from committing similar religiously-motivated violence.

He believes Mkalavishvili was not the prime organiser of the religious violence. "He was not a real fanatic. He was just a puppet," Ramishvili insisted. "The violence was pragmatic: to divert public attention from the old government and to shift the blame for its failures onto minorities." He said recent changes to the criminal code allow for plea-bargains, where those convicted can get reduced sentences in exchange for naming others. "If Mkalavishvili is pressured sufficiently, he will name those in the government who supported and encouraged him. I believe he will do anything to save himself."

Ramishvili said Mkalavishvili had only just returned from Georgia's autonomous Adjara region (which is at odds with the central Georgian government) when he held an 11 March press conference outside the public defender's office where he denounced the government of President Mikhail Saakashvili for "protecting sects and undermining Orthodox Christianity". Ramishvili said a police officer Mikhail Giorgadze was present at the press conference and was heavily criticised for failing to arrest Mkalavishvili.

In the morning of 12 March police stormed Mkalavishvili's church of the Iveria Icon in the Gldani district of Tbilisi where he and his supporters had barricaded themselves in. More than a hundred riot police destroyed its door with lorries, before deploying tear gas and batons in a clash with Mkalavishvili's supporters, leaving dozens injured. Mkalavishvili, Ivanidze and six others were seized. The press representative of Mkalavishvili's Gldani diocese, Mikheil Nikolozivishvili, was detained the following day.

Mkalavishvili was immediately taken into three-month pre-trial detention in line with a court order in June 2003 (under former President Eduard Shevardnadze the police failed to detain him in accordance with the order, despite his whereabouts in Tbilisi being widely known). At a closed hearing on 14 March Judge Manuka Nozadze of Tbilisi's Vake-Saburtalo district court ordered that seven Mkalavishvili associates be held in pre-trial detention for three months. Another suspect, Fr Gabriel Nemeiridze, was released under house arrest.

Immediately after the arrests, President Saakashvili denied that the new authorities are undermining Orthodoxy and justified Mkalavishvili's arrest as a move to "defend" the Georgian Orthodox Church. "Extremist religious groups threaten the Orthodox Church," he declared. "My supreme goal, as an Orthodox Christian and as president, is to defend my religion. I call on the people to support my efforts. The State should protect the Church from negative foreign influence and the activities of extremist groups."

The Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate issued a statement on 12 March stressing that Mkalavishvili is not a patriarchate priest (it defrocked him in 1996). However, it condemned the "arrest with the use of force" as "unacceptable", adding: "Georgian law enforcers could have arrested Mkalavishvili without clashes."

Reached on 17 March, Zurab Tskhovrebadze, chief spokesman for the Patriarchate, referred Forum 18 to the earlier statement and declined to discuss whether the Patriarchate believes others who committed or incited violence against religious minorities – including those within the Patriarchate alleged to have been involved - should also be detained and tried.

Mkalavishvili's detention was condemned by some opposition leaders. Irakli Mindeli of the Socialist party claimed on 12 March that the new authorities "are trying to weaken the Georgian Orthodox Church".

Old Calendarist Bishop Ambrose (Agiokypriantis) of Methoni in Greece, who oversees foreign parishes on behalf of Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili and therefore oversees Mkalavishvili, complained to Forum 18 of the police's "violent incursion" into the church and

what he called the "large-scale persecution" of church members. He believed the violence used to detain Mkalavishvili was unacceptable. "I don't object to Fr Basil's undergoing a trial," Bishop Ambrose told Forum 18 on 17 March, "but Georgia is not a western country. You can't expect the judicial system to be uninfluenced by political considerations." He objected that most of those who have been detained have not been charged with any offences.

Bishop Ambrose insisted that there is no evidence that Mkalavishvili had been involved in physical violence against religious minorities. Told that Forum 18 had spoken to victims of violence from his supporters and seen video footage of Mkalavishvili and his supporters attacking religious minorities, violently breaking up court proceedings and burning religious literature, Bishop Ambrose said he had seen video only of the Jehovah's Witness literature burning. He said he had attended court hearings in Tbilisi twice, including a June 2003 hearing. "I observed no disorder whatsoever."

Bishop Ambrose said he did not believe that Mkalavishvili had been involved in burning Bibles, despite testimony from Baptists that he was behind the attacks on the warehouse and on the Bible Society lorry in 2002, during which Bibles and other Christian books were burnt. "Our people assured us that no Bibles were ever burnt."

Asked how he viewed the burning of other religious communities' literature, the bishop responded: "My opinion is that we would not do this in Western Europe, let alone Greece. As a gesture in local circumstances, though, it is not inappropriate." He appeared to regard the issue as minor. "Certain standards of Christian behaviour are universal, others are cultural." Bishop Ambrose declined to say whether Metropolitan Cyprian had ever disciplined Mkalavishvili for his violent attacks or anything else. "It is an issue of internal church administration whether he has been disciplined under church law or not."

The new Georgian government, appointed in the wake of Saakashvili's landslide election in January after the ousting of Shevardnadze, has been under strong international pressure to punish those responsible for years of violence. The record so far has been pitiful: five members of a violent vigilante group Jvari (Cross) – including its leader Paata Bluashvili - were sentenced on 4 November in the town of Rustavi for their role in attacking Jehovah's Witness meetings. All received only suspended sentences.

Patriarchate spokespersons have always claimed that the religious violence came from those expelled from the Georgian Orthodox Church. However, Bluashvili identified Metropolitan Atanase Chakhvashvili of Rustavi and Marneuli as one of Jvari's co-founders in 1998 and local priest Fr Teimuraz as the group's spiritual father – both of them part of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate. Patriarchal clergy were behind an attack on a Catholic pilgrimage in Western Georgia in 2002, after which senior Patriarchate officials are alleged to have telephoned Catholic leaders to threaten them with serious consequences if they ever reported the attack. Patriarchal clergy were also allegedly behind the demolition of a True Orthodox church being built in the village of Shemokmedi in eastern Georgia in 2002.

The Jehovah's Witnesses report that they have documented numerous cases where priests of the Patriarchate have organised and led violent attacks on their meetings. Tbilisi-based Pentecostal pastor Nikolai Kalutsky also claims that it was a Patriarchate priest who organised the mobs that blockaded his home to prevent his Church from meeting there for worship, most recently last October. He showed Forum 18 last year copies of Bibles that had been torn into pieces by rampaging mobs.

"I have not heard that any priests of the patriarchate have been arrested," Tsimintia of the Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

"The old regime did nothing to crack down on the religious violence," Kalutsky told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 17 March. "The new government has demanded that the law be carried out and has taken decisive measures. I believe things will be better." However, he added

that he does not know whether if he tried again to hold services in his home mob violence against the Pentecostals would resume.

In the absence of a law on religion, no religious communities have legal status (except the Orthodox Patriarchate), while minority faiths have been prevented from building or acquiring places of worship, or publishing or importing religious literature. Bishop Songulashvili, for one, believes such problems may now be in the past.

Source: <http://www.forum18.org>

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Radical ex-priest held

Georgian police have raided a church to detain a radical ex-Orthodox priest after a clash with his supporters

BBC (15.03.2004) / HRWF Int. (16.03.2004) Email: info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- Vasily Mkalavishvili, known for his fierce attacks on religious minorities, had barricaded himself inside a church in the capital, Tbilisi.

More than 100 police destroyed its door with trucks, before using tear gas and batons in a violent clash with his supporters in the building.

Some 20 people, including children, were injured, reports said.

Mr Mkalavishvili was excommunicated by the Georgian Orthodox Church in 1996 after he admitted his followers had - on his orders - ransacked Jehovah's Witnesses premises.

They also burnt bibles belonging to the Baptist Evangelical Church, he said.

In July, a court issued an arrest warrant pending a trial .

Police tried to detain him, but Mr Mkalavishvili and the followers of his new church resisted.

According to AFP news agency, he gave a press conference on Thursday in which he strongly criticised Georgia's new pro-Western government and its US-educated President, Mikhail Saakashvili.

Hunger Strike

"Georgia does not exist right now," he was quoted as saying.

"It is only another US state, whose governor is George Soros" - a reference to the US billionaire philanthropist.

He also criticised what he said were government plans to register the Jehovah's Witnesses.

A police spokesman said Mr Mkalavishvili was arrested on charges of damaging property and staging riots.

Dozens of supporters gathered outside the detention centre where he was being held.

They said they were launching a hunger strike.

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Religious minorities' hopes and doubts ahead of presidential inauguration

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 News Service (23.01.2004) / HRWF Int. (23.01.2004) Email info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- Ahead of the inauguration of Georgia's new president Mikhail Saakashvili on Sunday (25 January), religious minorities and human rights activists have told Forum 18 News Service of their hopes that the new regime will bring religious freedom, as well as their doubts that anything will change. "The new leaders have spoken generally of democracy and human rights, but have tried not to use phrases like 'freedom of conscience'," Emil Adelkhanov of the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development told Forum 18 from the capital Tbilisi on 23 January. "They haven't wanted to offend those who oppose religious freedom - or to make promises people could remind them of."

He believes on the one hand there is hope for greater religious freedom because "the new leaders listen to the US State Department", while on the other there is pessimism because "they often base themselves on the five-cross flag", a reference to the traditional flag adopted as the new Georgian emblem that many regard as linked to the Orthodox Church.

Forum 18 tried to reach State Minister Zurab Zhvania on 23 January to try to find out what steps the new government was planning to take to introduce religious freedom and end the discrimination against minority faiths, but his office said he was not immediately available.

No spokesmen for the Georgian Orthodox Church were available on 23 January. Giorgi Andriadze, parliamentary secretary at the Patriarchate, told Forum 18 all were in church for a service which he was about to attend. Some minority religious leaders are optimistic about the new government. "I believe there will be changes for the better," Pastor Giorgi Chitadze, pastor of the Word of Life church in the town of Gori told Forum 18 on 23 January. "I believe democracy will move forward." He admitted that although the new leaders have not specifically committed themselves to religious freedom, they have pledged to abide by the constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion. "Saakashvili is American-educated - he won't behave like the old lot."

Few minority religious leaders could point to any significant improvements in their situation. Baptist, Pentecostal, Adventist, Catholic and Jehovah's Witness representatives have told Forum 18 it is too early to say whether the new leaders will definitively end the religious violence that has plagued Georgia since 1999 and allow religious minorities to gain legal status, a status only the Orthodox Patriarchate has been allowed to attain. "There have been no concrete changes - in Georgia things take time," Irma Mosiashvili, spokeswoman for the Adventists, told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 23 January.

"The only positive change we have seen is that our Watchtower Bible Society was finally able to register with the Justice Ministry on 28 November," Jehovah's Witness lawyer Manuchar Tsimintia told Forum 18 on 23 January. "This is a change - we have now got legal status as a non-governmental organisation." He said there had been no violence, except for a small incident in Senaki in western Georgia at the end of December when a local man had insulted a group of Jehovah's Witnesses. "But we have not held major congresses because of the winter, so we don't know if we could now do so undisturbed." In the past such congresses have been attacked by police and vigilantes.

While religious minority leaders welcomed the end of the series of violent attacks on religious minorities, some were sceptical over whether the calm would last. "We've not had any prominent cases of religious violence for several months, but it doesn't necessarily

mean such violence is over," Baptist leader Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 22 January. He pointed out that Old Calendarist priest Basil Mkalavishvili, who led much of the violence, is out of hospital and at large and has not been arrested, despite an outstanding warrant. "We have not so far seen anyone responsible for the violence being arrested since the ousting of President Shevardnadze. This would have been a signal of change."

Levan Ramishvili, director of the Liberty Institute, a prominent human rights group, says he hopes Mkalavishvili will be arrested soon. "The new government has no alternative than to arrest him," he told Forum 18 on 23 January, "otherwise it will become a great embarrassment for them." But Adelkhanov believes it might be a tactical mistake. "We fear that if they arrest him they will make him a martyr and stir up all his supporters. The violence will then start all over again."

Forum 18 has learnt that senior government leaders have declared privately that Mkalavishvili will not be arrested before the parliamentary elections.

Many believe that officials are waiting for indications of the new government's attitude to minority faiths. "Word of Life has not had problems recently," Chitadze reported, "but they're waiting for orders from above." He said a test of the new government will come in late February, when Swedish Word of Life preacher Carl-Gustav Severin is scheduled to visit Georgia. "We want to rent halls in Tbilisi and Gori - we'll find out if we're able to or not." Minority faiths are generally banned from renting state or private buildings under pressure from the Orthodox Church.

For others though, their difficulties continue. Nikolai Kalutsky, pastor of a Russian-language Pentecostal church in Tbilisi which has been prevented from meeting for worship because of mob attacks by self-appointed and self-styled Orthodox vigilantes, said his church still cannot meet. "We haven't tried to meet in my home - we're still banned from doing so," he told Forum 18 on 23 January. "There's been no movement on our court challenge to the ban."

Nor have the Catholics been able to get back any of their property confiscated during the Soviet or post-Soviet period. "Our case to get back our old church in central Kutaisi is still in the court," a Catholic who did not wish to be named told Forum 18 from the town on 23 January. "I don't think we'll ever get it back from the Orthodox." She said the local authorities are still refusing to offer the Catholics a plot of land to build a church in the town centre. "All they offer is land on the edge of town. The Orthodox Church and the local governor don't want Catholics to build a church in the town centre. Without Orthodox Church blessing you can't do anything."

Many doubt that the long-promised religion law (Georgia remains the only former Soviet republic without one) will be adopted soon, though Bishop Songulashvili told Forum 18 he had been informed that a text might begin passage through parliament in March, together with an amendment to the Civil Code to remove the ban on registering religious organisations. He said Council of Europe representatives have suggested that the new government should hold a consultation with all religious communities before the rescheduled parliamentary elections which are due on 28 March. But he believes it might be better to amend the Civil Code and allow religious communities to register and to leave a religion law until later. "The new parliament won't be ready to adopt a democratic religion law," he cautions. "It would be better to wait even a few years for a religion law than to have a law that is full of restrictions." Ramishvili of the Liberty Institute believes the Civil Code ban on registering religious communities could come from an expected Constitutional Court ruling. "We are helping the Russian Pentecostal community with their legal challenge," he told Forum 18. "We expect in the new circumstances the Constitutional Court will invalidate this ban." He said the challenge will be lodged in February.

He said the change to the Civil Code is necessary as "a first step to restore the equality of all religious communities". "Non-Orthodox communities are almost outlawed at the moment." Such a change would be welcomed by religious minorities. "We have long been praying for a new law and legal status," Mosiashvili of the Adventists declared.

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Jehovah's Witnesses victim exonerated by court in Tbilisi

ProFindPages (27.12.2004) / HRWF Int. (27.12.2004) Email info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> -- Mirian Arabidze, one of Jehovah's Witnesses, has finally been exonerated by the Supreme Court of Georgia, after wrongly being convicted of "hooliganism".

Arabidze was the victim of a mob attack in 1999 by religious extremists on a congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses gathered for worship in the Gldani district of the Georgian capital. Mr. Arabidze was among several victims who were severely beaten during the attack.

Although he was a victim of assault, Mirian Arabidze was later charged and subsequently convicted by a Georgian court of "hooliganism" for his presence during the attack.

After years of legal battles, the Supreme Court of Georgia eventually exonerated Mr. Arabidze. The Court also ordered compensation to him for approximately \$600 US for moral damages and legal fees. The compensation was paid as of November 18, 2004, and the exoneration was published in the official journal of the Georgian Ministry of Justice. Mr. Arabidze also received a letter of apology from the city prosecutor.

The court's decision appears to be a sign that the situation for Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia is improving. From 1999 to 2003 their peaceful religious services were constantly threatened with mob attacks by a minority group of religious extremists.

Unfortunately, the Prosecutor's Office in Georgia refused to prosecute the perpetrators of the mob attacks in Georgia and Jehovah's Witnesses filed an application with the European Court of Human Rights regarding the 1999 attack in Gldani. On July 6, 2004, the Court ruled that the Witnesses' application was admissible, and a decision on the merits of the case is expected in the coming months.

Such incidents have been seen in many of the ex-Soviet States and even Russia harbours a lot of prejudice towards Jehovah's Witnesses (some of which appears to be encouraged by Moscow).

Earlier this year, Moscow banned the Jehovah's Witnesses from performing religious activities in the City (but not in the rest of Russia). Sadly this action has encouraged some officials in Russia to place pressure on their activities outside Moscow as well. Only recently, a case involving deaf Jehovah's Witnesses was heard in the European Court. One of their meetings was stopped by officials and they were ordered to leave the building in a heavy handed manner. The meeting was legally held and they had an agreement to use the room where the meeting was held (and had done so many times before).

Unfortunately, the main pressure on the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia is coming from the Russian Orthodox Church, who see the group as a rival.

This reluctance, by the Orthodox Church, to tolerate any other religious group or organization, is likely to spread over the coming years. They have government support to

carry out these "attacks" and this also means the assistance of the state run television stations.

A program was shown recently that was critical of the Scientology group and one can be fairly confident to assume that they are "next" on the list. A similar program was produced about the Jehovah's Witnesses just before they received their ban in Moscow.

In both programs, the most extreme areas were highlighted and members of the Orthodox Church were invited to offer their comments. Unfortunately, representatives from the groups were not allowed to air their views and provide some balance to the information.

As in any religion, there are good and bad areas. However, the programs should be presented in an unbiased way, providing comments from people for and against. This would then allow the viewers to make up their own minds.

Much of the argument against the Jehovah's Witnesses is their alleged "control" over their followers. Yet, the Orthodox Church have shown many times that these are the methods they employ themselves, in trying to encourage others to join them. Free choice appears to be a luxury that only others offer. If the Orthodox Church get their way, there will be no choice in Russia at all!

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