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GEORGIA: Georgian Orthodox priests incite mobs against religious minorities

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Georgia's Constitutional Court today (25 May) ruled that mob attacks violated Pentecostal pastor Nikolai Kalutsky's rights to practice his faith freely, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Sozar Subari, the Human Rights Ombudsperson, is one of many who state that the mobs are instigated by local Georgian Orthodox priest Fr David Isakadze. Subari witnessed an attack by Fr Isakadze and told Forum 18 that "a criminal case should be launched against him. However, it will be difficult to prove that he is responsible as he no longer turns up in person." Fr Isakadze and Archpriest Shio Menabde apparently also led a mob to expel another Orthodox priest, Fr Levan Mekoshvili, from his parish accusing him of being a "liberal". Elsewhere, Baptists and Pentecostals both state that Orthodox priests instigate violence against their congregations. "Until those responsible for the violence - especially Fr David Isakadze - are brought to justice, the constitutional court ruling in Kalutsky's case will make no difference," Baptist Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili told Forum 18. The Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate failed to respond to questions about its responsibility.

Georgia's Constitutional Court ruled today (25 May) that Pentecostal pastor Nikolai Kalutsky's rights to practice his faith freely have been violated by mob attacks. "This strengthens my hand in seeking to get the police to help me and my church," he told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Tbilisi on 25 May. The Russian-language congregation Kalutsky leads has been subject to years of mob attacks, most recently with blockades of attempted church services at his home on 28 April (Orthodox Maundy Thursday this year), 12 and 13 May. The police have done little to protect his church or prosecute those responsible for the attacks, which are alleged to have been organised by the local Orthodox priest, Fr David Isakadze.

Attacks on Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities have been common for years in Georgia, but have died down since the arrest last year of a defrocked Georgian Orthodox priest, Vasily Mkalavishvili, who is now a priest of a Greek Old Calendarist jurisdiction. For his part in leading attacks, he was sentenced to six years jail (see F18News 1 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=503). However, despite the testimony of numerous victims of more than one hundred incidents of religiously-inspired violence that clergy of the Orthodox Patriarchate were involved, no others have been punished.

Sozar Subari, Georgia's Human Rights Ombudsperson, told Forum 18 on 2 May that he believed Fr Isakadze, the priest of the nearby St Mary's church, was responsible for the violence against Kalutsky's Pentecostal congregation. "A criminal case should be launched against him," he declared bluntly. "However, it will be difficult to prove that he is responsible as he no longer turns up in person." He said he himself had seen Fr Isakadze take part in a mob attack on Kalutsky's home three years ago.

On 28 April, a mob arrived at Kalutsky's Tbilisi home at 6.30 pm, just after church members began arriving. "I don't know how they knew we had a service," Kalutsky noted. He said up to thirty people - who described themselves as Orthodox - shouted "crude insults" at church members and would not allow any to enter the house. After three hours they left and the church went ahead with a service.

Sozar Subari, the human rights ombudsperson who was present, told Forum 18 he had called the head of Tbilisi city police to demand that his officers protect Kalutsky's home. Only then had the police arrived. The following day, Orthodox Good Friday, some 50 church members were able to hold a service undisturbed while police defended the house.

Mobs returned on 12 May, the next time the church tried to meet in his home as it does not have a church building. After the service, police accompanied some church members back to the metro station so that they could return home safely, but when they had gone, some fifteen members of the mob - who had followed them to the metro - surrounded the church members. They attacked the pastor's brother, Ivan Kalutsky, beating him on the head and kicking him. Another young church member was hit on the back and head, while the mob threw water over three female church members.

"I had never seen so many policemen and security agents near Pastor Kalutsky's house. And so many civic activists," Emil Adelkhanov of the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 15 May. "As a result, the Pentecostals did manage to get there and sing their hymns."

However, on 13 May a similar mob blockade of Pastor Kalutsky's home took place. "The police have asked us not to hold further meetings in our home for fear of violent reactions," Pastor Kalutsky told Forum 18. "They keep promising they will help us find alternative premises, but this is very hard as other venues are afraid to host us."

At a press conference on 14 May, the Liberty Institute accused members of the David Agmashenebeli Society, which includes a number of Orthodox Church leaders, of being behind the mob attacks on Kalutsky's home. The institute also identified Fr Isakadze as being one of the organisers. "Fr David Isakadze provoked the local residents to disperse the people," Giorgi Meladze of the institute told the press conference. "I want to say once again that the state in this case is obliged to charge him in accordance with the law."

Nikolai Kalutsky agrees. "Only this week the Chronicle newspaper quoted neighbours on our street as admitting that they are getting advice from Fr David Isakadze in their protests." The pastor rejects claims by local residents that the services create noise. He insists that as the room they meet in is sited partly below ground (Forum 18 has viewed the site) and they make a point of keeping the noise down, the neighbours have no reason to complain.

"Until those responsible for the violence - especially Fr David Isakadze - are brought to justice, the constitutional court ruling in Kalutsky's case will make no difference," Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, head of the Baptist Church of Georgia, told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 25 May. "He has been brought to responsibility neither by the state nor by the Patriarchate."

In an interview with Imedi TV, Fr Isakadze refuted the Liberty Institute claims, saying they were "all lies". Asked by Forum 18 whether he was involved in organising such mob attacks, Fr Isakadze denied it absolutely. "Why are you addressing me?" he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 25 May. "I've already addressed this slander." He also declined absolutely to respond to earlier claims that he had personally physically attacked Catholic Bishop Giuseppe Pasotto during the break-up of a Catholic pilgrimage in western Georgia in 2002, despite having boasted to the fundamentalist paper Mrevli (Parishioner) of how he hit the bishop. Fr Isakadze then put the phone down.

In August 2003 it is alleged that Fr Isakadze and another priest Archpriest Shio Menabde gathered more than 100 supporters and drove out with physical threats the newly-appointed Patriarchate priest of the Digomi district of Tbilisi Fr Levan Mekoshvili, whom they accused of being a "liberal". Fr Mekoshvili was threatened that if he returned to his parish he would be beaten.

Reached on 25 May, the Orthodox Patriarchate failed to respond to Forum 18's questions about its responsibility for the violence against religious minorities.

Elsewhere, a husband and wife team, Gaioz Shvangiradze and Ia Bagatelia, who lead the Living Word of Christ Pentecostal church that meets in a private home in the village of Orsantia in Zugdidi district, were summoned on 3 May by the head of the village administration, Murman Khazalia. He demanded to see their identity documents as well as a document giving them the right to hold services. No such official document exists in Georgia. He warned them that until they produce such documents all services were banned and threatened to call in the police and representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Shvangiradze and Bagatelia appealed to Bagrat Kiria, representative of Georgia's Human Rights Ombudsperson in Zugdidi region, calling on him to help them exercise their constitutional right to practise their faith freely. Kiria told Forum 18 that he had invited Khazalia on 10 May to discuss the issue, but discovered that he had been taken to hospital after suffering a heart attack. "Khazalia's attempt to ban the church violated their freedom of belief and the European Convention on Human Rights," he told Forum 18 from Zugdidi on 18 May. "He has no authority to do this. Besides, where did he get the idea of licences to conduct religious activity from?"

However, Shvangiradze told Forum 18 from the village on 18 May that the church - which has some 50 members - can now meet normally again. "The problems are now over," he reported. He said the congregation had suffered minor harassment from drunks in the past, but this was the first time an official had tried to interfere in their activity. Kiria told Forum 18 that this incident was the first harassment of Protestants in Zugdidi region to his knowledge. "Earlier there were many attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses, but it grew calmer after the arrest last year of Basil Mkalavishvili. People are more tolerant now."

Pastor Levan Akhalmosulishvili, a member of an independent network of Baptist churches, reported continuing aggression from self-declared Orthodox mobs. He said that in early April a woman in the village of Vachnadziani, near Gurjaani east of Tbilisi, invited church members to visit her home. The five visiting Baptists showed the Jesus film in her courtyard. The following week the five tried to return, but were obstructed by a mob which, Akhalmosulishvili claims was organised by the local Orthodox priest.

"The priest wasn't present himself, but organised five criminals, who blocked the road and insulted them," Akhalmosulishvili told Forum 18 from Gurjaani on 25 May. "Fifty other villagers were standing around the criminals, so to avoid violence our people left." However, he said that over the next days, people loyal to the priest visited at home all those who had attended the showing of the film and threatened them not to have anything to do with the Baptists.

In a separate incident, Akhalmosulishvili reported that local Baptists had taken a group of visiting Americans to see their church in the village of Velitsikhe in eastern Georgia in mid-May. "Fellow-villagers who claimed to be Orthodox were very aggressive towards the group, describing them as 'rubbish' and saying they would not tolerate Baptists in their village," he told Forum 18. He said the congregation still cannot use the church and each Sunday a car sits outside the building to prevent the Baptists from gathering there for services. A mob prevented the Baptists from completing building work on the house owned by a Baptist deacon (see F18News 14 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=489).

"In none of these recent incidents was violence actually used," Akhalmosulishvili told Forum 18. "In the past they used to beat us, but now they've been well trained to insult us but not to touch us."

For the comments of Georgian religious leaders and human rights activists on how the legacy of religious violence should be overcome, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=499

For background information see Forum 18's Georgia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=400

A printer-friendly map of Georgia is available at

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

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