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ABKHAZIA: "We'll kick out anyone"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

The internationally unrecognised entity of Abkhazia has defended its expulsion in early April of three Georgian Orthodox monks and four nuns. Defence Minister Merab Kishmaria told Forum 18 News Service that "I took the decision to expel them. We'll kick out anyone who prevents the population of Abkhazia from living calmly." Asked how the monks and nuns in the remote Upper Kodori Gorge had disturbed the population, he responded: "They don't recognise our independent state or our Orthodox leader Fr Vissarion." The monastery has functioned in the Upper Kodori Gorge from the early 1990s, when the area was under the control of Georgian authorities. After fighting in August 2008, the area came under the control of the Abkhaz authorities. The monks and nuns were expelled after they resisted pressure from Fr Vissarion Apla - who heads the canonically unrecognised Abkhaz Orthodox Church - to leave the Georgian Orthodox Church and join the group he controls. Deputy Foreign Minister Maxim Gvinjia defended the expulsions, insisting to Forum 18 that the Abkhaz Orthodox Church can prevent any religious community it does not like from functioning. The local Georgian Orthodox community has thus been denied access to any clergy just before the major Orthodox feast of Easter.

The Defence Minister of the unrecognised entity of Abkhazia in the South Caucasus, Merab Kishmaria, has defended the expulsion of three Georgian Orthodox monks and four nuns in early April. "They should not be here in Abkhazia," he told Forum 18 News Service from the capital Sukhum (Sokhumi in Georgian) on 7 April. "I took the decision to expel them. We'll kick out anyone who prevents the population of Abkhazia from living calmly." Asked how the monks and nuns in the remote Upper Kodori Gorge had disturbed the population, he responded: "They don't recognise our independent state or our Orthodox leader Fr Vissarion."

Asked why Fr Vissarion Apla – who heads the separate Abkhaz Orthodox Church – had any role in the life of another religious community, Kishmaria told Forum 18: "Because he recognises our independent state."

Kishmaria kept insisting that the monks and nuns had come specially from the Georgian capital Tbilisi to settle in Kodori. Told that they had already been there when the Upper Kodori Gorge was seized by Abkhaz forces from the Georgians in fighting in August 2008, the minister responded: "I don't care if they were already there." He pledged to continue the same policy.

The three monks – Fr Georgi (Gurchiani), Fr Zavulon (Gamkrelia) and Fr Bidzina (Kobalia) - had been living in St George's Monastery in the village of Ajara, which had been re-founded in the early 1990s when the Upper Kodori Gorge was under the control of the Georgian government. The four nuns were at St Nino's Convent nearby.

The sparsely-populated Upper Kodori Gorge is inhabited by some 150 Svans, a sub-group of the Georgian people and generally considered to be more devout Orthodox than other ethnic Georgians. However, the rugged terrain and often harsh weather made it difficult for many to attend services at the monastery regularly.

Within days of the capture of the region by Abkhaz forces, the monks and nuns were visited by an Abkhaz Orthodox delegation from Sukhum led by Fr Vissarion. He pressured them to renounce their affiliation to the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate and submit to the jurisdiction of his group, which is not recognised as canonical by any other Orthodox Church, though it gets some support from the Moscow Patriarchate.

State officials told Forum 18 in September 2008 that they would do nothing to defend the monks' and nuns' right to continue living in Ajara (see F18News 4 September 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1183).

On 2 April, Abkhaz officials and Abkhaz Orthodox representatives arrived in Ajara to expel the monks and nuns. The three monks were taken to Sukhum, where they were questioned. "Vissarion took them in his car," Georgian Orthodox priest Fr Pimen Kardava, who knows the three expelled priests, told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 6 April. He said they were filmed by Abkhaz television and also questioned by Defence Minister Kishmaria, though the minister declined to confirm or deny this to Forum 18. Fr Pimen said the nuns were expelled the following day.

Fr Pimen told Forum 18 that the monks are "in such a state of stress" and "very tired psychologically" that they do not want to talk about their expulsion.

In the wake of the expulsion, Sergei Jonua, the representative in the Kodori Gorge of the Abkhaz President Sergei Bagapsh, told the Abkhaz official news agency Apsnypress on 3 April that the monks had been expelled for refusing to recognise the "Abkhaz authorities and the Abkhaz Church".

Fr Vissarion told Apsnypress that his Church would send two of its priests to serve in the village.

Abkhaz presidential representative Jonua's telephone was either engaged or went unanswered each time Forum 18 rang on 7 April. Fr Vissarion's telephone also was engaged whenever Forum 18 called. However, told that Forum 18 wanted to discuss with him the expulsion of the Georgian Orthodox monks and nuns, the woman who answered the phone at his office in Sukhum told Forum 18 that there were "enemies" there.

Also resolutely defending the expulsion of the monks and nuns is Maxim Gvinjia, Abkhazia's Deputy Foreign Minister. "They refuse to recognise the Abkhaz Church even though they're working on its territory," he told Forum 18 from Sukhum on 7 April. "They think they're still in Georgia."

Gvinjia believes the Georgian Orthodox Church does not and should not exist in Abkhazia. "We don't have the Georgian Church in Abkhazia."

Asked why clergy of one religious community should submit to the authority of a different religious community, Gvinjia responded: "They don't have registration with the Abkhaz Church – all religious communities need to register with them."

He insisted the monks and nuns had broken the law. Asked to identify which law, Gvinjia declared: "Not the law, but the regulations of the Abkhaz Church. All communities – such as the Catholic congregation here in Sukhum – have a licence from them." Asked whether other faiths, such as the Muslim community, also need the permission of the Abkhaz Orthodox Church to operate, Deputy Foreign Minister Gvinjia confirmed that this was the case.

Gvinjia claimed that religion and the state are separate, insisting that the state does not impose anything on the Abkhaz Orthodox Church or give it any duties. However, he defends its power to veto the activity of other religious communities. Asked if this means that the Abkhaz Orthodox Church can prevent any religious community it does not like from functioning in Abkhazia, he replied: "Yes."

The Abkhaz authorities formally banned the Jehovah's Witnesses from functioning in 1995, however this ban is currently unenforced (see F18News 27 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=308).

Abkhazia has remained out of the control of the Tbilisi authorities since a bitter war in the early 1990s, which the Tbilisi authorities lost. Almost all ethnic Georgians fled Abkhazia in the wake of that war. The Republic of Abkhazia has been recognised only by Russia and Nicaragua, but is not recognised in international law.

An independent observer based in Abkhazia who asked not to be named told Forum 18 that the presence of the remaining 40,000 to 50,000 ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia is delicate. Whether spiritual support should be provided by the Georgian Orthodox Church or the Abkhaz Orthodox Church is "politically-loaded", the observer pointed out. "Abkhaz view any preaching that says people should be under the jurisdiction of the Georgian Patriarchate as explosive and a political provocation."

However, Fr Pimen, a native of Gali District in Abkhazia who worked for three years as a priest there until his expulsion in 2008, insisted to Forum 18 that he had never preached on political issues. "We [priests] don't have the right to speak on political issues – our Patriarch has not given us his blessing for us to do that. We only spoke about our faith, and that people should not take drugs nor commit murder. I told people in Gali that they belong to the Georgian Church, not to the Georgian state."

Fr Pimen was expelled in April 2008 in the wake of a "special decree" from the Abkhaz Orthodox Church, of which Forum 18 has seen a copy. The Abkhaz State Security Service (SSS) denied to Forum 18 that it had been involved in the expulsion, despite information from independent sources that it had been (see F18News 23 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1118).

Fr Pimen laments that no Georgian Orthodox priests are left in the whole of Abkhazia with his expulsion and the expulsion of the monks and nuns from Ajara. He told Forum 18 that he did not know if the expulsion of the monks and nuns was deliberately timed two weeks before the Georgian Orthodox Church celebrates Easter. "This is the most important feast for the Church – and, I believe, for the world."

The Georgian Patriarch, Ilya II, announced on 6 April that he regretted the expulsion of the monks and nuns from Upper Kodori, but insisted this would be "temporary". He said he would visit Abkhazia and the Kodori Gorge "probably in May". He did not explain how this would be arranged.

However, his proposed visit was rejected by Fr Vissarion and by deputy Foreign Minister Gvinjia. "It is not likely he will visit," Gvinjia told Forum 18. "This was just a political statement." (END)

More coverage of freedom of religion or belief in Abkhazia is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=25>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

A printer-friendly map covering the disputed entity of Abkhazia, whose extent is not marked, can be found in the north-west of the map entitled 'Georgia' at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=georgi>.

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