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The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

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GEORGIA: President pledges punishment for religious violence

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Seven weeks after an ecumenical service was broken up by a mob led by violent Old Calendarist priest Basil Mkalavishvili, President Eduard Shevardnadze attended the re-run of the event on 14 March amid tight security at the Central Baptist Church in Tbilisi. "Today I cannot help expressing my great sorrow and even anger that our unity, mutual respect and liberty of faith have been violated by some aggressors," Shevardnadze told the congregation. "I would like you to believe: the aggressor will be punished." Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, head of the Baptist Union in Georgia, told Forum 18 News Service he believed the service would be "a milestone in the development of the religious life of Georgia". But others remain sceptical of the authorities' promises to end the years of religious violence, for which none of the known perpetrators have been sentenced.

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Speaking at the end of the service, Shevardnadze made his most explicit pledge so far to end the violence which, since 1999, has seen more than one hundred violent attacks on religious minorities (including non-Patriarchate Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists and Pentecostals). These attacks have mainly been the work of a group led by Mkalavishvili in Tbilisi and the Jvari organisation in Rustavi, led by Paata Bluashvili.

"As the president of Georgia and as a believer, I would like to express not only my personal displeasure, but today I also promise you that the government and the president will do their best to safeguard full freedom for the individual to express his or her faith," Shevardnadze pledged. "Anyone who violates this principle will be made responsible by the state. I would like you to believe: the aggressor will be punished."

Bishops and leaders of the Georgian Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Baptist churches, as well as numerous ambassadors, attended the ecumenical service. "I took President Shevardnadze and the people accompanying him into the sanctuary and sat them in the presbytery next to the altar," Songulashvili told Forum 18. "Before the service I was told by the head of protocol that the president would simply attend the service and would not say anything. But as soon as I finished the opening prayer the protocol official approached my chair from behind and whispered that the president wanted to make a speech. At the end of the service I invited him to speak."

Songulashvili regards the service as a success. "Liturgical dance, Catholic and Baptist choirs, Orthodox preacher Fr Basil Kobakhidze and other celebrants made the service unforgettable."

A message from Konrad Raiser, general secretary of the World Council of Churches, was read out expressing the WCC's concern about the religious violence "especially during the recent week of prayer for Christian unity". "We have strongly denounced such acts of intolerance as criminal, and we have supported the position of the main Christian churches in Georgia, Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran and Baptist, which condemned this violence and appealed for appropriate action by the Georgian authorities." Raiser added that the WCC warmly welcomed Shevardnadze's "courageous personal gesture" to attend the service. "We see in this action a determination of the Georgian authorities to confront intolerance and extremism in all its forms, and to uphold the traditional Georgian values of hospitality, tolerance and coexistence."

Songulashvili noted that in contrast to the 24 January service, this time "incredible security measures" were taken. The Baptist church was surrounded by 600 policemen, roofs of surrounding buildings were occupied by snipers from the presidential guard and three hours before the service the whole district of the city was sealed off. Cars parked on the streets were taken away by special trucks. Hundreds of people who tried to attend were refused entry and had to listen on loudspeakers in the churchyard.

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"I am sorry I cannot describe the service itself: my only impression was lots of policemen and bodyguards. Even on the roof of the church there were at least two of them, with walkie-talkies," Emil Adelkhanov of the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 15 March. "So I was standing outside, together with other human rights activists, journalists and believers of every kind (including Pentecostal pastors). Everyone had an invitation letter, but it didn't work. Some of us were cursing, others were telling jokes."

The 24 January service, which was due to have been conducted by the leaders of five Christian denominations, was "unexpectedly" broken up by a mob of "ultra-fundamentalist Orthodox" led by Mkalavishvili an hour before it was due to begin. "Some of the people in the Church managed to lock the gate, but in spite of this, the attacking mob tried to penetrate the church," Songulashvili recounted. "They smashed the windows and physically and verbally insulted young and old members of the congregation who had come to the church to prepare the worship. Some of the young people tried to defend the church, they where mercilessly beaten, including deputy minister of the Central Baptist Church Otar Kalatozishvili." Songulashivili spoke to the state Chancellery, which agreed to send extra police.

After consultation, the Christian leaders decided to abandon the service. "We agreed with the city police chief Mr Saladze that our people would leave the territory and Mkalavishvili's people then would leave the entrance to the church. They pretended they were leaving, but then started to beat our people and robbing them with force."

"The mob led by Basil Mkalavishvili beat me heavily, throwing bricks and stones at me," reported Lela Kartvelishvili after the attack. "I felt myself helpless and I have understood that there is no justice and law in our country - what I mean: police that openly, morally supports fundamentalists."

Songulashvili recounted that the January attack came a year after an earlier attack in Tbilisi when Bibles were burnt. "That day I was frustrated. But now I am very sad and angry." Among those protesting against the renewed violence were United States President George Bush and German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, as well as foreign religious leaders. "I was most distressed to hear of the harassment and intimidation you have been suffering," the new Archbishop of Canterbury and head of the worldwide Anglican Communion, Dr Rowan Williams, wrote to Songulashvili on 30 January. "Please remember that you and your people are in our prayers."

On 28 January Shevardnadze ordered four senior officials – interior minister Koba Narchemashvili, prosecutor general Nugzar Gabrichidze, head of the state chancellery Petre Mamradze and Tedo Japaridze, secretary of the Security Council - to investigate the attack and punish those responsible. On 18 February, State Minister Avtandil Jorbenadze came to the Central Baptist Church and apologised for the attack. But no-one has yet been arrested or punished for it.

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