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GEORGIA: Did Orthodox arsonists destroy Baptist church?

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

In the wake of threats by the local Orthodox priest to burn down the Baptist church in Akhalsopeli in eastern Georgia, the building was wrecked by fire in the early hours of 15 June. "The walls survived the fire, but the interior has been reduced to ashes," Emil Adelkhanov of the Centre for Peace, Democracy and Development told Forum 18 News Service. "We're certain our priests were not involved," Metropolitan Daniil Datuashvili of the Orthodox Patriarchate told Forum 18. "Such attacks were always carried out in the past by schismatics who broke away from the Patriarchate." Adelkhanov ridiculed such claims. "There have constantly been incidents of violence when Patriarchate priests were involved."

The same day that a Pentecostal church in the capital Tbilisi was blockaded by self-appointed Orthodox vigilantes (see separate F18News article), a Baptist church was set on fire in the village of Akhalsopeli in Kvareli district of eastern Georgia. "The walls survived the fire, but the interior has been reduced to ashes," Emil Adelkhanov of the Centre for Peace, Democracy and Development told Forum 18 News Service from Tbilisi on 15 June. "Fifty local Baptist families used to pray in the church." He said the local Orthodox priest had already threatened to burn down the church. Metropolitan Daniil Datuashvili of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate said he was not aware of the two latest incidents, but condemned all religious violence. "We're certain our priests were not involved," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 16 June. "Such attacks were always carried out in the past by schismatics who broke away from the Patriarchate."

Timur Berianidze, governor of the Kvareli district, dismissed the burning of the Baptist church in Akhalsopeli. "I live in the village," he told Forum 18 from Kvareli on 16 June. "There is no Baptist church." He said he was aware there had been some conflict with the Orthodox but had no information about any incident. Forum 18 was unable to reach the governor of Akhalsopeli, Malkhaz Chutlashvili, on 16 June.

Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, head of the Baptist Union, said the fire broke out at the church in the early hours of Sunday morning. He told Forum 18 on 16 June that the church's pastor Avtandil Darbadze was with all the other Baptist pastors at the Central Baptist Church in Tbilisi for a Pentecost celebration. "Ironically, we were celebrating the descent of fire," Songulashvili noted.

He complained that although church representatives in Akhalsopeli contacted the local police, they did not visit the scene in the wake of the arson attack. Songulashvili declined to speculate as to who was behind the attack. "This is what the police will establish in their investigation." Forum 18 was unable to reach the local police on 16 June.

Adelkhanov told Forum 18 that local villagers had complained that Orthodox priest Bessarion Zurabashvili had earlier directly threatened local Baptists that he would burn down the church. Fr Zurabashvili, who is believed to have a criminal background, was reportedly twice removed from the active priesthood by the Patriarchate. Adelkhanov said a car of the Kolkhoznik make – the same as that owned by Fr Zurabashvili – was seen near the Baptist church late on 14 June.

"The previous priest, an elderly man, had excellent relations with the Baptist community," Songulashvili noted.

The Orthodox Patriarchate has constantly repeated its condemnation of attacks on religious minorities in the face of widespread scepticism about the sincerity of its condemnation. A statement on the Patriarchate's official website www.patriarchate.ge – in Georgian, Russian and English – categorically condemns the violence. It declares that, while rejecting "extreme religious liberalism", it opposes rival religious communities "only in civilised forms". The Patriarchate publicly distances itself from one of the prime offenders, Old Calendarist priest Basil Mkalavishvili.

"The Georgian Orthodox Church has always responded negatively to these attacks," Metropolitan Daniil told Forum 18. "But these attacks were carried out by certain schismatic groups and political forces which are nothing to do with the Orthodox Church." He claimed that such attacks – Georgia has seen well over 100 in the past three years, directed at True Orthodox, Baptists, Pentecostals, Catholics and Jehovah's Witnesses – happen in "other countries". Asked which countries, he named the United States and Britain. He said his Church is very worried by the violence and has presented its condemnation via television and the press.

Repeating his denials that any Patriarchate priests had ever been involved in violence against religious minorities, Metropolitan

Daniil insisted that were it proven that priests were involved in such attacks they would be subject to "the severest punishment that the Church could lay down".

Despite his claims, the second most senior Orthodox bishop, Metropolitan Atanase Chakhvashvili of Rustavi, declared on television in February 2002 that all "sectarians" in Georgia should be "killed", naming the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Baptists, the Anglicans and the Pentecostals as among those who "have to be shot dead". In a strange move, Metropolitan Atanase came to the Central Baptist Church in Tbilisi on 25 April this year and left a written apology to Songulashvili.

Adelkhanov is not impressed by Metropolitan Daniil's blanket denials of involvement by clerics of the Patriarchate. "There have constantly been incidents of violence when Patriarchate priests were involved," he told Forum 18. "Everyone knows this." He pointed out that Fr Zurabishvili is a Patriarchate priest, as is Fr David Imnadze, a Tbilisi priest who, he says, has been behind the intimidation of the Russian-language Pentecostal church led by Pastor Nikolai Kalutsky blockaded on 15 June. "Although Fr David was not there yesterday, he came to the house last year and threatened the Pentecostals and he organised the earlier blockade on 1 June."

Adelkhanov also cited incitement against Baptists by Orthodox clergy in eastern Georgia since 1998. "There have been many occasions where priests have incited action in their sermons or have led mobs to persecute local Baptists," he told Forum 18. "Malkhaz Songulashvili told me a few years ago to downplay such involvement by Patriarchate clergy to avoid conflict with the Patriarchate. Now he doesn't oppose making this public."

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