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GEORGIA: Catholic radio broadcasts axed - literally

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

In the wake of an attack on independent radio station Dzveli Kalaki by axe-wielding men who destroyed the antenna and put it off the air, station director Irakli Machitadze is optimistic the attackers will be brought to justice. "There was wide publicity over the attack and officials promised that the case would be dealt with properly," he told Forum 18 from Kutaisi. He said the station's weekly Catholic programme – which has aroused the anger of the local Orthodox bishop and self-appointed vigilantes – was the most likely reason for the attack. But he vowed the Catholic broadcasts will continue. "It is a question of principle." No-one has been sentenced in Georgia for the series of attacks on religious minorities over the past few years, although the organisers are well known.

The director of a radio station whose antenna was destroyed on 28 March by a group of men armed with axes – apparently to prevent the station airing a weekly Catholic programme - says he hopes the perpetrators will be brought to justice quickly. "I'm inclined to be optimistic," Irakli Machitadze, director of independent station Dzveli Kalaki (Old City) told Forum 18 News Service on 15 April from Kutaisi in western Georgia. "There was wide publicity over the attack and officials promised that the case would be dealt with properly." However, others are more sceptical. "Theoretically they will get justice," Emil Adelkhanov of the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development told Forum 18 from the capital Tbilisi on 15 April. "But in practice this is highly doubtful." Other employees of the station regard this attack as part of the continuing series of attacks on minority faiths by self-appointed ultra-Orthodox vigilantes that have plagued Georgia in recent years. The vigilantes enjoy de facto immunity from prosecution (see F18News 25 March 2003).

Tengiz Shekralidze, who is handling the case at the Kutaisi city procuracy, declined to discuss it. "The investigation is underway, so I am not allowed to say anything," he told Forum 18 on 15 April, before putting the phone down.

Machitadze reported that the attackers broke down the door of the radio station late on 28 March, then broke their way onto the roof and destroyed the antenna. He put the damage at 4,000 US dollars (28,985 Norwegian kroner or 3,690 Euros). "We will have to find this money ourselves. It is unlikely we will ever be able to recover it, even if they prosecute the perpetrators." The station has been off the air since the attack, though Machitadze hopes it will be possible to begin broadcasting again in the next few days.

"The Catholic programme is one of the most likely reasons for the attack," Machitadze told Forum 18. He said the Catholic community in Kutaisi, which he described as "fairly strong", proposed the idea of a weekly programme a year and a half ago. He believes the fact that the programme touched on the case of the city's former Catholic church – now in the hands of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate – may have contributed to Orthodox hostility to the programme and the station.

Machitadze stresses that the 28 March attack is only the latest in a string of incidents, including rowdy protests on 22 and 31 January. "The police investigated those incidents but brought no criminal cases. Why not?" He says that in the wake of the latest attack, the city procuracy is again looking at these incidents.

As one of the leading suspects in the latest attack – Gia Aprasidze – is a serving army officer, investigation of the attack was handed to the military procuracy, but on 10 April it was returned to the city procuracy after the military procuracy ruled that there was "insufficient evidence" against the officer.

Both Machitadze and Adelkhanov report remarks by the local Orthodox bishop, Metropolitan Kallistrat, who has been hostile to the station. "He twice warned his flock not to listen to the Catholic programme and threatened that he would deny communion to those who did so," Adelkhanov told Forum 18. He pointed out that local Orthodox seminarians took part in demonstrations against the station in January, including an attempt to ransack the station on 31 January that was prevented by the station's security guards after the police had left.

Machitadze believes Metropolitan Kallistrat might have been behind an attempt to close down the station at about the same time, when local people protested that the station's broadcasts were harming their health.

With such strong forces ranged against it, Adelkhanov doubts whether Dzveli Kalaki will see justice done and whether the state

authorities will protect it. "I believe the station will not have protectors strong enough to resist those who are more powerful. The Catholic Church is very cautious and I doubt it will take strong measures to defend the station."

Despite the continuing pressure, Machitadze vows that the weekly 20-minute Catholic broadcasts will continue. "It is a question of principle," he told Forum 18.

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