**FORUM 18 NEWS SERVICE, Oslo, Norway**
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5 November 2004

# GEORGIA: Violence against religious minorities continues

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

*Violence and the threat of violence against Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic and Pentecostal religious minorities continues, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. For example, a Baptist deacon, Zurab Khutsishvili, has been banned by police from building a house and threatened with been driven out of his village. Villagers have also beaten-up two fellow-Baptists. Other religious communities face similar opposition. Questioned by Forum 18, local Orthodox bishop Ekvtime declined to say whether the Orthodox Church would allow religious minorities to build places of worship. The deacon's village is close to the village of Akhalsopeli, where a Baptist church affiliated with the separate and larger Baptist Church of Georgia was burnt out by a mob incited by the local Orthodox priest. Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, head of the Baptist Church, told Forum 18 that "the local priest is stirring up the villagers so we can't start the rebuilding."*

One year on from Georgia's "Rose Revolution" that saw the end of large-scale violence against religious minorities, some violent incidents and threats of violence are continuing, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. In mid-October the policeman in a village in Gurjaani district of eastern Georgia orally banned a local Baptist deacon from building a small home amid opposition to his presence by other villagers, who claim he will use the home to hold Baptist services. Two fellow Baptists helping him build the house were beaten at the end of October. Although violence has reduced, Lutherans, Pentecostals and other Protestants report lower-level violence or threats of violence and obstruction to their right to hold public worship services in the past two months.

Zurab Khutsishvili gained planning permission to build the house on land he owns in the village of Velistsikhe, Pastor Levan Akhalmosulishvili, a leading member of the independent Association of Christian-Baptist Churches, told Forum 18 from nearby Gurjaani on 3 November. "The policeman told Khutsishvili he would drive him out of the village." At the end of October, he reported, local villagers beat two fellow-Baptists who were helping Khutsishvili build his house.

Khutsishvili has been in charge of the village congregation of some 25 adult Baptists for the past four years. Akhalmosulishvili insists that Khutsishvili has the full right to build his house. "All the documents have been drawn up correctly and approved," he told Forum 18.

He claims the opposition is being stirred up by a local Orthodox priest, but the local Orthodox bishop categorically denied this. "I know about this case, but there were no excesses on the part of the Orthodox Church. I can assure you no priest was there," Bishop Ekvtime (Lejava) of Gurjaani and Velistsikhe told Forum 18 from Gurjaani on 5 November. "No-one was beaten – you've been given false information."

The bishop categorically denied that the Orthodox Church has been involved in any moves against religious minorities. "The Orthodox Church does not get involved." He said any citizen, whether Baptist, Muslim, Catholic or Hindu, can build their own house. He declined to say whether this meant that the Orthodox Church would allow religious minorities to build places of worship.

Forum 18 has been unable to find out from officials why the policeman threatened Khutsishvili and whether those who attacked the two Baptists will be prosecuted. Those who answered the telephone on 3 and 4 November at the Gurjaani district administration and at the district police declined to answer any questions or to give names or number of officials responsible for the actions. Forum 18 was unable to reach anyone on 3 and 4 November at the Gurjaani district architectural bureau.

Akhalmosulishvili reported that as soon as Khutsishvili started to build the house neighbours stirred up by a young Orthodox priest Fr Avtandil called the police. The policeman arrived soon after to issue the threats. Akhalmosulishvili added that when the deacon was at the village administration to discuss the difficulties the young priest shouted at him: "Who gave you the right to build here? We won't allow you to."

Akhalmosulishvili says that other communities of the Association of Christian-Baptist Churches, one of three Baptist jurisdictions in Georgia, have faced similar opposition from local people which he claims has on occasion been stirred up by Orthodox priests.

At the end of October, a house in the village of Kuchatani in Kvareli [Qvareli] district of eastern Georgia used as a simple church for up to fifteen local Baptists was attacked twice in the night. "The first time the young lads broke the windows," Akhalmosulishvili


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reported, "the second time they came back and smashed the doors and furnishings inside." The church had only just been repaired when it was attacked. He said when the Baptists complained about the attacks to the local administrative head he denied any knowledge of them. "He knows very well," Akhalmosulishvili noted.

Kuchatani is only some 20 kilometres (12 miles) from the village of Akhalsopeli, where a Baptist church affiliated with the separate and larger Baptist Church of Georgia was burnt out by a mob allegedly incited by the local Orthodox priest Fr Bessarion Zurabashvili in June 2003 (see F18News 3 July 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=96).

"There has been no progress so far on rebuilding this church," Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, head of the Baptist Church of Georgia, told Forum 18 from the capital Tbilisi [T'bilisi] on 5 November. "The local priest is stirring up the villagers so we can't start the rebuilding." He said he had met the local Orthodox bishop who admitted he could not do anything to control the priest as the priest had backing "from Tbilisi".

Nikolai Kalutsky, pastor of a Russian-language congregation in Tbilisi, reported that on 12 September local residents again tried to halt the use of his home for his congregation to gather for a meal after it held its harvest festival service in the open air in a nearby forest. "Five local residents – the people who had been stirred up before by the Orthodox priest – shouted at us, saying they had warned us not to meet in my home, that they hated our faith and they wouldn't tolerate it," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 5 November. "Then they started to beat me, but I was able to escape and lock myself in the house."

Kalutsky reported that although the police came three times to his house in the wake of the threats and the beating, they begged him not to file an official statement about the incident.

He said the week before the harvest festival, the neighbours had not objected when the church had used the meeting room in his home for a wedding, the first service he had held undisturbed in his house for more than a year. In the past a vast mob used to gather on the street outside the house every time he tried to hold a service.

But Kalutsky reported some progress. On 18 October the Constitutional Court ruled that his rights had been violated when police banned the use of his home for worship services. "This is the only court which has ruled in favour of the rights of believers," he told Forum 18. He says he now has to take the ruling to the local police to ask them to defend him and his congregation next time they hold a service in his home.

Although other religious communities have not reported physical violence against them in recent months, several have complained of threats and intimidation. In early October, Lutheran Bishop Andreas Stoekl travelled to lead a service in the small church they have in the town of Bolnisi, south west of the capital. "They found a poster on the door of the church declaring 'We do not want you here – leave this place!'," Songulashvili told Forum 18. He said the following Sunday the Lutherans found another poster with threats and the door of the church was deliberately damaged so badly that it could not be opened. "Although there was nothing direct, it is clear this was done at the inspiration of the Orthodox," Songulashvili insisted.

Songulashvili also complained of religious intolerance shown when the Vatican's nuncio in Georgia, Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, had been thrown out of Tbilisi's Orthodox cathedral, while Catholics in the mostly Catholic-populated village of Ivlita had got nowhere in their protests to local officials about what they regard as the vandalism to their village church, which is now in the hands of the Orthodox. "The local priest has concreted over the graves of Catholic missionaries inside the church to leave no trace of a Catholic presence," Songulashvili told Forum 18. "There is enormous tension. But when Catholic priest Fr Zurab tried to speak to the local governor, Niko Nikolovishvili, he was refused a meeting on about thirty occasions."

Pastor Georgi Chitadze of the Word of Life church in the town of Gori reported that their congregation in nearby Rustavi is still being denied the possibility of renting any public hall in the town for worship. "We asked again in mid-October and they told us again that halls are for cultural purposes, not for religious events," he told Forum 18 from Gori on 5 November.

While he maintained that life for Georgia's religious minorities has improved over the past year, Chitadze said local officials are still refusing to register the church's ownership of an office it bought in Gori three years ago. "There is an oral instruction not to register it, though we have paid all the fees and presented all the documents," he reported. "We have taken this up locally and nationally, but the authorities are afraid to help us. They're afraid religious violence will break out again."

Two communities that were subject to violence in the past, the True Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of Metropolitan Ephraim Spanos of Boston and the Jehovah's Witnesses, report no recent violence. "There has been no violence against us in the past year - it stopped with the change in power," Jehovah's Witness leader Genadi Gudadze told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 5 November. "We have held large congresses this year in private houses without the violent attacks we had in the past." A True Orthodox parishioner in Tbilisi told Forum 18 the same day that they too could meet for worship in private houses.

Akhalmosulishvili said the October attacks are the latest in a long-running series affecting congregations in his Baptist Association. "Last spring in a village in the Pankisi Gorge, a Baptist was invited by local people," Akhalmosulishvili told Forum 18. "When the Orthodox priest found out, he organised a mob of drunken men to drive out the Baptist. After the Baptist spoke to the men for an


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hour they told him if he didn't clear out he would leave as a corpse. He was nearly killed."

He said a local Baptist congregation was forced to move its meeting place in the village of Vanta in Telavi district in 2003 after the Orthodox priest stirred up the people against it.

"We still can't build churches," Akhalmosulishvili told Forum 18. "If we did so there would be a revolution." He says his Association has 14 congregations plus 20 smaller groups. In places where the Association does not have a building already, congregations have to meet in private homes.

"Orthodox priests never show themselves directly," Akhalmosulishvili claimed. "They do this through criminals or the police." He believes Orthodox priests are still acting against religious minorities, despite the change of regime in Georgia at the end of last year, when then-president Eduard Shevardnadze was ousted and Mikheil Saakashvili was elected president.

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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