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GEORGIA: No end to immunity despite presidential pledge

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

Nearly two months after President Eduard Shevardnadze made a high-profile pledge that those who attack religious minorities will be punished, attackers continue to enjoy state-backed immunity. On 4 May a mob stopped the Jehovah's Witnesses holding a congress in the village of Ortasheni near Gori, Genadi Gudadze, the Jehovah's Witness leader in Georgia, told Forum 18 News Service. The mayor of Gori and the police chief warned them not to hold the congress. "It is not some bandit taking action against us but the state. So who can we complain to?" Gudadze declared. "Progress since the president made his pledge is not very significant," Levan Ramishvili of the Liberty Institute told Forum 18. "Perhaps the 'mainstream' religious minorities – like the Baptists, the Catholics and the Lutherans – have seen some improvement, but the others – including the non-Patriarchate Orthodox, the Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna followers – have seen nothing change."

Nearly two months after Georgia's president Eduard Shevardnadze made a high-profile pledge that those who attack religious minorities will be punished, attackers continue to enjoy state-backed immunity. On 4 May a mob managed to stop the Jehovah's Witnesses holding a congress in the village of Ortasheni near the city of Gori west of the capital Tbilisi. Genadi Gudadze, the Jehovah's Witness leader in Georgia, told Forum 18 News Service from Tbilisi on 6 May that the mayor of Gori and the police chief warned them not to hold the congress. "It is not some bandit taking action against us but the state," he complained. "So who can we complain to?" Meanwhile the trial of violent Old Calendarist priest Father Basil Mkalavishvili is making little progress, while the investigation into those who axed the transmitter of a radio station in the western city of Kutaisi which broadcast a weekly Catholic programme has likewise not resulted in any arrests.

Georgia has been plagued in recent years with violence against religious minorities by self-appointed vigilantes, who have physically attacked Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses and True Orthodox. President Shevardnadze made his promise that "the aggressor will be punished" at an ecumenical Christian prayer service on 14 March in Tbilisi's Central Baptist Church (see F18News 25 March 2003). The service was originally scheduled for 24 January, but had to be abandoned when it was attacked. However, no-one has ever been prosecuted for the more than 100 attacks which have seen believers injured, places of worship wrecked or demolished and religious literature burnt.

"Progress since the president made his pledge is not very significant," Levan Ramishvili, director of the Tbilisi-based Liberty Institute, which has defended religious minorities, told Forum 18 on 6 May. He said government departments continue to leak information to extremist groups about the activity of religious minorities which helps them undertake attacks. "Perhaps the 'mainstream' religious minorities – like the Baptists, the Catholics and the Lutherans – have seen some improvement, but the others – including the non-Patriarchate Orthodox, the Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishna followers – have seen nothing change."

In the run up to the planned congress in Ortasheni, Gudadze reported that local Jehovah's Witnesses were joined by their lawyer from Tbilisi, Manuchar Tsimintia, at a 3 May meeting with Gori's police chief. "He told them he couldn't defend them because of the high level of criminality in the region and the shortage of police officers," Gudadze told Forum 18. "They always say this."

He said the message was later repeated when the Jehovah's Witnesses met the mayor Paata Chkhaidze later in the day. Also present at that meeting was parliamentary deputy Guram Sharadze, who has been vocal in recent years in opposing the activity of minority faiths in Georgia. "The officials invited Sharadze to attend, that's my guess," Gudadze declared. "He criticised and insulted our people."

Gudadze said that in the wake of the protests by a mob of more than 100 people who blocked all access roads to the village and the refusal of the police and mayor to protect the 700 or so Jehovah's Witnesses expected to attend the congress, the organisers had to cancel it. "They contacted those planning to come from across the region and told them not to."

The Jehovah's Witnesses have been able to hold such congresses in other regions without problems, provided they do so quietly without advance publicity and that no more than 200 people attend, Gudadze reported.

There has been little progress in the trial in Tbilisi of Mkalavishvili, who has organised or led dozens of attacks on religious minorities in recent years. "Hearings have begun and the victims have at least been able to begin to give their testimony," Gudadze

reported. However, he complained that the two or three police officers assigned to the court are not enough to prevent "disorder" in the courtroom or to protect the victims. "They have no intention of defending us," he declared. Nor does he believe Mkalavishvili will ever been sent to prison. "The result can be predicted."

But he notes that a similar trial of Paata Bluashvili, leader of the extremist Jvari organisation in the town of Rustavi near Tbilisi, is proceeding with less intimidation of the victims. "The courtroom is quieter and safer – it is not as bad as at Mkalavishvili's trial."

Meanwhile, Irakli Machitadze, director of the independent radio station Dzveli Kalaki (Old City) in Kutaisi which was put off air by axe-wielding men who destroyed the antenna on 28 March (see F18News 16 April 2003) and which was attacked again on 17 April, says there has been no visible progress in the case. "They say there is progress in the investigation of the 28 March attack and that they have identified the suspects," Machitadze told Forum 18 from Kutaisi on 6 May. "But these are standard phrases. No-one has been arrested." He added that there had been no progress in the investigation of the 17 April attack.

He said students and non-governmental organisations held a public meeting in the city centre on 1 May to protest against the attacks. "The students were originally protesting against the university, saying they wanted to be allowed to listen to our station. Then they turned against the mayor's office." Machitadze said at a 3 May meeting with the city mayor Nugzar Paliani, the mayor had declared that the problems for the station were now "resolved". "The mayor and the police chief promised that the investigation would be successful and that the station would be back on air soon."

Machitadze said officials had offered the station to place their antenna on the nearby television mast, to help guarantee security. He told Forum 18 that he would be prepared to accept this as a "compromise", though he said it will take about four months to arrange and will cost the station money.

Paliani insisted that five perpetrators of the first attack had been identified, but said they could not be found. "A hunt is underway for them," he told Forum 18 from the city on 6 May. "Certainly they will be punished." But he said investigators had not yet identified the organiser of the attack. He strenuously denied suggestions that the station had been attacked to halt its weekly Catholic programme. "There is a mobile phone mast on the same roof and that was probably the target of the attack," he claimed.

Machitadze says he expects the Catholic programme to continue when the station resumes broadcasting in the next few days.

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