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GEORGIA: Who incites anti-Baptist village mobs?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

The governor of Gurjaani district, Akaki Tsikharulidze, has denied to Forum 18 News Service that he was, according to local Baptists, among officials who "agitated" against an independent Baptist congregation, "stirring up hostility" and encouraging a mob of up to 600 villagers to halt the building of a home for Baptist deacon Zurab Khutsishvili in the village of Velitsikhe. Attacks on a Baptist congregation in another part of Georgia have continued, and no religious minority – such as Pentecostals, True Orthodox, Evangelical-Baptists and Catholics – believes that they can openly build places of worship. Pentecostal Pastor Nikolai Kalutsky told Forum 18 that "Until religious minorities gain legal status this will not change." Baptist Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili commented on the prospects for building non-Orthodox places of worship that "without a law on religion, local authorities could easily say no - but by the same token they could also say yes. It depends on local circumstances."

Two small independent Baptist congregations in villages in eastern Georgia are still facing violent attacks aimed at removing them from the villages. But the governor of Gurjaani district, Akaki Tsikharulidze, has vehemently denied Baptist claims that he was among the local officials who encouraged a mob of up to 600 local villagers to bring a halt to the building of a home for Baptist deacon Zurab Khutsishvili in Velitsikhe in November. "The Baptists are just twelve families and the villagers say they already have one church," he told Forum 18 News Service from Gurjaani on 13 January, referring to the local Orthodox church. "But it isn't true to say the Baptists can't build non-Orthodox places of worship." Local Baptists reject his assurances, in comments echoed by believers of many minority faiths across Georgia, who currently have no right to build new places of worship.

In a separate case, on 28 December, unknown attackers smashed windows of a house in the village of Kuchatani in Kvareli [Qvareli] district used as a simple church for up to fifteen local Baptists, the latest in a series of attacks on the house, Pastor Levan Akhalmosulishvili, a leading member of the independent Association of Christian-Baptist Churches, told Forum 18 from Gurjaani on 13 January. The house had not long been repaired after attacks in October (see F18News 5 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=446).

These latest incidents come as the trial continues of a handful of the most notorious of those responsible for the five-year reign of terror against religious minorities by self-appointed and self-declared Orthodox vigilantes between 1999 and 2003. Old Calendarist Orthodox priest Fr Basil Mkalavishvili and six associates are on trial in a court in the capital Tbilisi (see F18News 17 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=490), but hundreds more individuals who organised and took part in the wave of violence – which religious minorities say included clerics of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate – have never been prosecuted.

Akhalmosulishvili told Forum 18 that he had received an urgent call from Deacon Khutsishvili on 8 November to rush to Velitsikhe, where the mob was surrounding his house, carrying banners declaring "We're Orthodox, we don't need Baptists!". "For three hours the mob shouted at and insulted us," he reported. "Some television stations were there filming – Rustavi-2 reported neutrally, but others were hostile."

Akhalmosulishvili claims that he found out later that, for two days, the governor Tsikharulidze and the head of the village administration Nukri Bakhlishvili had "agitated" against the Baptists, "stirring up hostility". He said one teacher had later reported that after "agitation" in the school, teachers and children had missed school to take part in the demonstration. "This was all prepared in advance."

Akhalmosulishvili said that the governor arrived during the demonstration and told the Baptists the authorities could not go against the will of the people. But, he said, the police prevented violence against the Baptists. "Television cameras were there, so they were afraid."

Three days later, Akhmosulishvili and Khutsishvili were summoned by Tsikharulidze, who told them he respected them, but warned them they were "going against the people". Akhmosulishvili said he told the governor that it was his duty to uphold the rights not only of the majority, but of the minority too. The governor told the Baptists to sell the house or else it would be demolished, despite the fact that Khutsishvili has planning permission for it.

"It is a lie that I agitated against the Baptists," Tsikharulidze told Forum 18. "We simply asked the Baptists not to make the situation

worse." He claimed the villagers "don't understand" the Baptists' rights and that the authorities are trying to explain to them patiently to them. "I've been trying to form the opinion of the villagers," he claimed, "but at present the village is against the Baptists building."

While freely admitting that the Baptists have the constitutional right to build a home which can be used for worship also or a church, Tsikharulidze constantly reminded Forum 18 of the opposition of "the vast majority" of the villagers. "I'm a state representative and I'm governed by the constitution," he claimed, but refused to explain why the authorities were preventing the Baptists from completing the building for which they have planning permission.

Without explaining how, Tsikharulidze said the Baptists will have completed the house "within three months", adding that - if invited - he will "definitely" attend the ceremonial opening of the house.

Akhalmosulishvili remains unimpressed. "We've been in the village for ten years," he told Forum 18. "There has never been such opposition before. Why is it happening now all of a sudden?" He said each Sunday unknown people in cars watch who is arriving for their service in the nearby home of another congregation member. "These are spies, sent by the authorities," he claims. Meanwhile, building has come to a standstill. "Whenever we try to restart, we are threatened."

Elsewhere in Georgia, Forum 18 could discover no religious minority communities currently building places of worship openly. "There is no religion law and religious communities apart from the Orthodox Patriarchate have no legal status, so they cannot build," pastor Nikolai Kalutsky of a Russian-language Pentecostal congregation in the capital Tbilisi [T'bilisi] long harassed by self-appointed Orthodox vigilantes told Forum 18 on 13 January. "Until religious minorities gain legal status this will not change."

Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, leader of the largest Baptist church union in Georgia, the Evangelical-Baptist Church of Georgia, told Forum 18 the local authorities in Kvareli district have still not given permission for the congregation to rebuild the church burnt out by a mob allegedly incited by the local Orthodox priest Fr Bessarion Zurabashvili in the village of Akhalsopeli in June 2003 (see F18News 3 July 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=96). "It is a long time with no decision," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 14 January. "There was a change of local leadership after the revolution of a year ago, plus there is no clear policy or guideline." He said if the authorities refuse permission to rebuild the church, the Baptists will have to buy another property and remodel it for use as a church.

He says his church does not have funds at present to build new churches, but is currently fundraising for two new churches. Asked if he believed permission would be given for non-Orthodox places of worship he responded: "Without a law on religion, local authorities could easily say no - but by the same token they could also say yes. It depends on local circumstances."

Fr David Georgadze, priest of the True Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of Metropolitan Ephraim Spanos of Boston in the United States, says his 100-strong congregation in the city of Kutaisi [K'ut'aisi] in western Georgia has long wanted to build its own church. "This is our number one priority," he told Forum 18 on 13 January. "It is not good to pray in a house - we want to worship God in a church built in traditional style." He said it was impossible to build under the old regime ousted in November 2003, but added that the new city leaders appointed by President Mikeil Saakashvili have still not taken up their posts in the city, so the congregation does not know if it could build its long-desired church.

The Catholic Church also points to continuing problems. "In Akhaltsikhe [Akhalt's'ikhe] in the south, we want to build a new church," Fr Gabriel Bragantini, who heads the Kutaisi diocese, told Forum 18 from the city on 14 January. "The local authorities still say we need the permission of the Orthodox Church. Nothing has changed there since the change of government." But overall he was slightly more optimistic. "In Kutaisi and some other regions, the authorities say we can build new churches, but we have not tried yet." Nevertheless, he remains cautious. "When the authorities speak of course there are no problems, but in reality we don't know what would happen. I think there would be many difficulties actually trying to build."

Fr Bragantini said Catholic leaders in Tbilisi had raised the impossibility of building new churches with the government, but it had given no response. "President Saakashvili doesn't want to think about this problem at the moment - he has too many other difficult problems to deal with."

Meanwhile, Pastor Akhalmosulishvili has had enough and is planning to write to President Saakashvili, though "letters don't reach him". "Religious minorities here are in a worse situation than under President Shevardnadze," he claimed. "Either Saakashvili is a hypocrite or he is playing at democracy. He's the president not just for the Orthodox, but for all citizens." He said the Orthodox are building more than a hundred churches across the country, but Protestants cannot build even a small house. "If we're banned from building churches, meeting and praying together, let them expel us from Georgia." (END)

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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