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GEORGIA: Will mob halt Assyrian Catholic centre?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Assyrian Catholics in Georgia's capital Tbilisi fear more mob attacks, after a religious and cultural centre was attacked by a mob, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "The Orthodox Church and fundamentalists don't want a Catholic presence," Fr Benny Yadgar told Forum 18. "If we start to use the centre for worship these fanatics could attack our people with knives and wooden posts. Our people have a right to be protected." Fr Yadgar insists that the problems do not come from the authorities, but a current signature campaign could lead to pressure on the authorities. Police have refused to comment to Forum 18 on the attacks. The Georgian Orthodox Church and the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee – unlike human rights activists, religious minorities and the Human Rights Ombudsperson – have refused to defend the Assyrian Catholics. "I called on Patriarch Ilya to defend our church, but he says it is not his business," Fr Yadgar stated.

One month after a hostile mob invaded and damaged a new religious and cultural centre Tbilisi's Assyrian Catholics are building in the Georgian capital, the community lives in fear of attack. "The Orthodox Church and fundamentalists don't want a Catholic presence in Georgia," the community's priest Fr Benny Yadgar told Forum 18 News Service from Tbilisi [T'bilisi] on 18 October. "I fear that if we start to use the centre for worship these fanatics could attack our people with knives and wooden posts. Our people have a right to be protected."

Giorgi Khutsishvili, head of the Tbilisi-based International Center of Conflict Negotiations, said the "disturbing" attack was instigated by fundamentalist Orthodox determined to prevent a Catholic church being built. "This is a clear issue: the Assyrian community has the right to build its centre," he told Forum 18 on 18 October. "So what if it is going to be used for worship?" His centre has hosted a meeting of the multi-faith Religions Council to discuss the issue.

Fr Yadgar insists that the problems do not come from the authorities. "The government says: 'Go ahead, don't worry!'" he told Forum 18. He added that the police had offered to send officers to protect the building, as long as the Assyrians paid for it, an offer the community had turned down. "We don't want the police to have to stand at the doors of our place of worship." But he fears that a signature campaign now underway in the local district could lead to further pressure on the authorities. "They go around saying they need 200,000 signatures to block us."

Fr Yadgar said the office of the Human Rights Ombudsperson has been sympathetic and has scheduled a 27 October meeting to discuss their concerns to which he and the Catholic bishop, Giuseppe Pasotto, have been invited.

Forum 18 was unable to reach Giorgi Siradze, police chief for Vake-Saburtalo district where the Assyrian Catholic centre is based, to find out how the rights of the community will be protected. Reached on 19 October, the duty officer said the police were not allowed to give information to journalists and refused to give Siradze's number.

Fr Yadgar said the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate has failed to speak out against the threats. "I called on Patriarch Ilya to defend our church, but he says it is not his business."

Despite the fact that the attack was widely reported in the media and was the subject of a debate on Rustavi-2 television, Zurab Tskhovrebadze, spokesperson for the Orthodox Patriarchate, told Forum 18 on 19 October he had never heard anything about any problems over the Assyrian Catholic centre. "If it was true, of course it would be unacceptable for us Orthodox to use force, whether for political or religious ends."

The Orthodox Patriarchate retains a powerful hold over society and the government and has successfully prevented almost all minority faiths from openly building new places of worship in recent years (see F18News 25 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=861). Some Georgian Orthodox priests have a record of inciting mob violence against religious minorities (see eg. F18News 25 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=569). Intolerance of religious minorities is widespread within Georgian society, despite some legal improvements (see F18News 24 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=568).

Georgia's politicians have shown little interest in the Assyrian Catholics' concerns. "This was not an attack – it was merely

misinterpretation of the feelings of people," Lali Papiashvili, deputy head of the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee, told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 19 October. "People were falsely informed by some kinds of activists that the building may cause religious problems for the local population." She denied that anyone would object to the building of a non-Orthodox place of worship. "I don't have any information that the Assyrian population is afraid."

Papiashvili's colleague, Elene Tevdoradze, who chairs the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee, was equally unconcerned. "I haven't been to the Assyrian centre, but I've received no complaints," she told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 18 October.

Human rights activists and other religious minorities, however, have defended the embattled Assyrian Catholic community. "The city authorities were wrong to take into account Orthodox objections to the Assyrian centre," Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, head of Georgia's Baptist Church, told Forum 18 on 4 October. Support for the Assyrians has also come from the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Lutherans, Fr Yadgar told Forum 18.

Fr Yadgar said the new centre was invaded by a mob of about 60 people on 18 September, three or four days after anonymous, undated leaflets started to circulate in the district, stirring people up against the Catholics and urging them to come to the centre. "The letter alleged that Catholics are aggressive proselytisers who killed our monks in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It also alleged they marry cats and dogs and give the Eucharist to animals."

Fr Yadgar was away at the time of the mob invasion, but Giuni Gulua was one of two community members who tried to explain to television journalists and to the mob why the community was building the centre. "Part of the mob obviously had no clue as to why they were there, but the other part was very aggressively hostile, saying we had no right to build a Catholic church," she told Forum 18 on 19 October. "We explained that we had all the legal documents we needed to build the church, but many of them weren't prepared to listen to us. We then left to avoid any possibility of violent confrontation." She said some of the mob then went down to the cellar and damaged the interior walls.

Fr Yadgar said the cultural centre deliberately combines classrooms and meeting rooms with a sanctuary for worship. "Without Christianity, we Assyrians have no culture, so it is natural the two go together," he told Forum 18. "But in any case, we are not recognised in law as a religious organisation and do not have the right to build a church." After initial difficulties (see F18News 14 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=184), he eventually managed to get all the approvals they needed from the city authorities. Construction work began in 2004, he added, but finding the necessary money has delayed building. "Because of the situation in Iraq we have had no support from there."

Although all the external work is now complete, Fr Yadgar said completing the interior could take another year, especially in the wake of the damage and any potential attack. (END)

For the comments of Georgian religious leaders and human rights activists on how the legacy of religious violence should be overcome, see http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=499

For more background 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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