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GEORGIA: Baptists deny they burnt down own church

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

Baptist leader Malkhaz Songulashvili has described as "silly" a suggestion to Forum 18 News Service by district governor Timur Berianidze that Baptists in the village of Akhalsopeli burnt down their own church. Berianidze described as "a lie" the widely-held view that the local Orthodox priest Bessarion Zurabashvili was involved. Songulashvili said Fr Bessarion keeps visiting families and "stirs them up against our people". Villagers have threatened the Baptists that they will never be allowed to rebuild their church and if they do so, they warn that it will be burnt down again. Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams and Pope John Paul II are among those who have condemned ongoing religious violence in Georgia.

Baptists have rejected suggestions made by the governor of the district in eastern Georgia where a Baptist church was destroyed on 15 June that they set fire to their own church. "Some people are saying the Baptists did it themselves because they wanted a much nicer church," Timur Berianidze, governor of the Kvareli district, told Forum 18 News Service on 3 July. He described as "a lie" the widely-held view that the local Orthodox priest Bessarion Zurabashvili was involved. Berianidze denied reports from Baptists in the village of Akhalsopeli that they were still facing threats. "That is false information. There is no pressure."

Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, head of the Baptist Union who visited Akhalsopeli again on 3 July, described accusations that the Baptists burnt down their own church as "silly". "It is clear to everyone that this was done at the instigation of the Orthodox priest and even with his direct participation," he told Forum 18 from the capital Tbilisi on 3 July. He said Fr Bessarion keeps visiting families and "stirs them up against our people". Villagers have threatened the Baptists that they will never be allowed to rebuild their church and if they do so, they warn that it will be burnt down again.

The governor told Forum 18 there was "nothing new" in the investigation. "No-one has been arrested, but the district police are continuing to investigate," Berianidze reported. He said it was impossible to say when any arrests in the case might be made.

Givi Berashvili, police chief for Kvareli district, was less forthcoming. "Everything is normal there," he told Forum 18 on 3 July. "There was a fire, that's all." Asked about speculation that Fr Bessarion was involved, he denied it vigorously, then put the phone down.

A high-profile delegation from Tbilisi, led by Bishop Songulashvili, visited the burnt-out church for a Eucharist service on 22 June. Joining the delegation were the Secretary of Security Council Tedo Japaridze, Deputy Secretary Rusudan Beridze, Interior Minister Koba Narchemashvili, US Ambassador Richard Miles, German ambassador Uwe Shramm and an Orthodox Archpriest Basil Kobakhidze. The delegation was accompanied to the village by the governor of Kakheti, Bidzina Songulashvili (no relation to the bishop), and other local police and security chiefs. "You do not need to have a roof to worship God," Ambassador Miles told the congregation at the end of the service.

"The service was an enormous encouragement for the local congregation and ministers," Bishop Songulashvili told Forum 18, "but it also was a powerful message for the local regional and district authorities. They had never expected that burning of a Baptist church would have caused such attention from ambassadors and the national government in Tbilisi."

However, Akhalsopeli's Baptists remain highly concerned about continuing pressure on the community, even after the fire. Marika Tskhadadze reported from Akhalsopeli on 29 June that after the 22 June service relations between the Baptists and "some local people" became tense. "They are warning us that they will not let us have a church in this village," she declared. "They say 'we do not need foreign religions here'. They sent somebody to tell us that they will stone us if we still keep attending the burnt-out church."

She said that after a further service at the burnt-out church, threats were made "even more vigorously". "The priest has been particularly threatening me in person, saying he will not forgive me for those interrogations he had to undergo at the procuracy." She added that local criminals have threatened to pull down any new church the Baptists build to replace the old. However, Tskhadadze insisted the Baptists "are not scared of anything".

Bishop Songulashvili told Forum 18 he had hoped the 22 June service would mark the end of their problems. "It was our hope that situation would improve immediately," he declared. "But it seems there are some forces that are interested in stirring up Orthodox

people against non-Orthodox."

The congregation believes that only pressure from the district governor, whose brother is said to be a friend of Fr Bessarion, will put an end to the harassment of the Baptists. "If the priest stops the people will also be pacified," Tskhadadze argued.

Berianidze insists that the Baptists can continue to live and meet for worship in Akhalsopeli. "They can build a new church," he pledged.

Georgia has been plagued by religious violence in recent years, with attacks by self-appointed Orthodox vigilantes on True Orthodox, Pentecostal, Baptist, Catholic and Jehovah's Witness targets. One of the most active vigilantes is Old Calendarist priest Basil Mkalavishvili, who was ordered by a district court in Tbilisi on 4 June to be held in preventive custody for three months (see F18News 5 June 2003). He went into hiding to evade detention, but at the end of June a Georgian paper Alioni published a letter from him to Eduard Shevardnadze claiming that the president was taking instructions from the "secret world government" and allowing "sects" to multiply. He warned that the president was heading for hell.

Although there have been more than 100 attacks on religious minorities in the past four years, Georgia has failed to sentence anyone for involvement in these attacks. The country has been under intense pressure to end this immunity, both from other governments and from religious leaders abroad. The new Archbishop of Canterbury and head of the worldwide Anglican Communion, Dr Rowan Williams, wrote to Bishop Songulashvili in January to express his distress at the attack that month on an ecumenical service at Tbilisi's Baptist church.

When he received Alexander Chikvaidze, Georgia's new ambassador to the Vatican, on 15 May, Pope John Paul expressed his clear concern about religious violence in Georgia, stressing the importance of the right of freedom of conscience "expressed most sublimely in freedom of worship". He highlighted the pledge by President Shevardnadze in the spring that those guilty of religious violence would be punished (see F18News 25 March 2003).

"It is fidelity to truth and charity which renders anomalous, indeed even contradictory, any obstacles placed in the path of genuine religious worship and the preservation of cultural patrimony associated with it," the pope told the ambassador. "In this regard, I am confident that the recent statement of President Shevardnadze about religious intolerance echoes the thoughts of all men and women of goodwill."

But some are sceptical about the level of political will, especially in the run-up to elections. "The issue of religious violence in Georgia has to be sorted out even though the authorities are not keen on that because of the upcoming parliamentary elections," Bishop Songulashvili declared. "The international community in Georgia is seriously interested that religious liberty is appreciated in this country."

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