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## Georgia

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report**

Report

**September 13, 2011**

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The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. There were reports of isolated incidents including concerns regarding the ability of members of minority religions in penitentiaries to worship and a lack of action by government entities in regards to licensing applications made by members of minority religions.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. As in the previous reporting period, the implementation of new policies to further promote religious freedom slowed. Systemic problems remained largely unchanged, such as the return and maintenance of disputed church property claimed by religious minority groups and currently held by government entities, legal registration of religious denominations, and unequal legal frameworks. However, the Ministry of Corrections and Legal Assistance took steps during the reporting period to make access to penitentiary institutions equitable for representatives of all religious confessions and to provide for religious worship by inmates of all confessions.

There were continued reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In the occupied region of Abkhazia, which remained out of the control of the government, members of the Muslim community were killed by unknown assailants. The public defender noted that the number of cases of harassment during the reporting period dropped significantly after the courts in August sentenced eight men, associated with a radical Georgian Orthodox group accused of harassment in the past, to substantial prison sentences for hooliganism and obstructing the work of a journalist. Prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom, including the president, the public defender, the then-minister of reintegration, and the leader of the opposition party Christian Democratic Movement.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The embassy hosted and participated in events to promote religious freedom and human rights. The U.S. mission

launched a program to strengthen civil society in the country, which includes organizations that promote human rights and tolerance. Embassy representatives frequently met with religious and nongovernmental organization (NGO) leaders to promote religious freedom.

### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 26,911 square miles and a population of 4.6 million, including the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. De facto authorities in the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, supported by several thousand occupying Russian troops, remained outside the control of the central government. There are strong correlations between ethnic groups and religious affiliation, as well as geographic area.

Most ethnic Georgians (84 percent of the population, according to the 2002 census) associate with the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). Orthodox Christians who are not Georgian accept the territorial jurisdiction of the GOC and generally use the primary language of their communicants (for example, Russian, Armenian, or Greek). There remain a small number of mostly ethnic Russian adherents of three dissident Orthodox schools: the Molokani, Staroveriy (Old Believers), and Dukhoboriy (Spirit Wrestlers). Also present are radical Georgian Orthodox groups, such as Society of Saint David the Builder, Union of Orthodox Parents, and People's Orthodox Christian Movement. According to the patriarchy, these groups are not associated with the GOC.

The Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC), the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), Judaism, and Islam have coexisted with Georgian Orthodoxy for centuries. Azeris constitute the second largest ethnic group (approximately 285,000, or 7 percent of the population) and are largely Muslim; most live in the southeastern region of Kvemo-Kartli, where they constitute a majority. Other Muslim groups include the ethnic Georgian Muslims of Ajara and Chechen Kists in the northeastern region, bringing Muslims to 10 percent of the population. Armenians are the third largest ethnic group (estimated at 249,000, or 6 percent of the population) and belong predominantly to the AAC; they constitute the majority of the population in the southern Samtskhe-Javakheti region.

There are an estimated 35,000 Catholics, largely ethnic Georgians or Assyrians, and 18,000 Kurdish Yezidis. The ethnic Greek Orthodox community numbers 15,000. There are an estimated 10,000 Jews.

Protestant and other nontraditional denominations such as Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, and Krishnas have become more active and prominent. Each of these groups represents less than 1 percent of the population.

### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Freedom of Religion

#### Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. The constitution recognizes the special role of the GOC in the country's history but also stipulates the independence of church from state. A 2002 concordat between the government and the GOC conveys unique status upon the GOC; the government does not have a concordat signed with any other religious group.

The criminal code specifically prohibits interference with worship services, persecution of a person based on religious faith or belief, and interference with the establishment of a religious organization. Violations of these prohibitions are punishable by a fine, imprisonment, or both; violations committed by a public officer or official are considered abuses of power and are punishable by higher fines or longer terms of imprisonment.

The Prosecutor General's Office (PGO) is charged with prosecuting human rights violations, including religious freedom violations. The Human Rights Unit within the PGO is tasked with monitoring the protection of some human rights including religious freedom. The Public Defender's Office (PDO), which serves as the human rights ombudsman, also monitors complaints of restrictions on religious freedom. However, the PDO and some minority religious groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, expressed some dissatisfaction with the lack of investigative follow-up in some cases. The PDO reported that, during the reporting period, it categorized 10 complaints as relating to religious freedom, including cases of physical assault and harassment.

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Under a 2006 law, religious groups other than the GOC may register with the government as noncommercial, nonprofit, legal entities to receive legal status and tax benefits. However, there is no option for registering as a religious organization. Registration is a function of the tax department of the Ministry of Finance, which must grant or deny registration within three days of application. A refusal may be appealed in court. There were no reports of any groups being refused registration during the reporting period. According to government statistics, there were approximately 20 religious organizations registered as legal entities as allowed under the law. Some religious groups expressed dissatisfaction with having to register as such an entity instead of as a religious group to receive legal status and tax benefits.

The Law on General Education specifically provides for freedom of religious belief, denomination, and conscience, including the right to choose and change any religious denomination at will.

A 2005 law separating state schools and religious teaching narrowed the interpretation of the government concordat with the GOC regarding teaching Orthodoxy as an elective part of the school curriculum. The law states that such Orthodox teaching may take place only after school hours and cannot be controlled by the school or teachers. Outside instructors, including clergy, cannot regularly attend or direct student extracurricular activities or student clubs and their meetings. Lay theologians, rather than priests, led such activities.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Orthodox Christmas, Epiphany, Good Friday, Orthodox Easter, Easter Monday, the Day of Apostle Andrew, the Day of the Virgin Mary, Svetitskhovloba, and Saint George's Day. The president declared Nowruz-Bairam, celebrated by the ethnic Azeri Muslim population, a national holiday on March 21.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. At the same time, religious groups other than the GOC complained that they did not have equal legal status, were not recognized officially as religions, and did not enjoy the same privileges as the GOC. Minority religious groups noted that local police did not always respond promptly to their complaints during the year. At year's end, police and prosecutorial investigations of many such complaints remained incomplete.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that before 2008, the Prosecutor's Office generally qualified attacks against them as religiously motivated cases, but that recently such attacks were predominantly qualified as hooliganism by prosecutorial investigators, and thus fall under a different category of criminal offense entailing lighter punishments. They reported that often cases categorized as hooliganism were not treated with the same seriousness as those categorized as religious attacks; often those investigations were not concluded. During the year Jehovah's Witnesses reported 12 new cases of societal abuses against them; there was no response by investigators in six of the cases. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that patrol police generally responded to their calls adequately.

Minority religious groups also complained that many licensing and permit decisions for buildings and construction, required to be made by government entities, that involved their confessions or members of their confession were often delayed. Some permit decisions remained pending at year's end.

Representatives from the Muslim community reported that in the region of Bolnisi, the local authorities issued a permit for the completion of a mosque, which was reported previously as having been delayed due to the intervention of a radical Georgian Orthodox group. However, in a separate building issue in Tbilisi, the construction permit for a Muslim cultural center had not been issued by year's end.

The 2002 concordat between the GOC and the state defines relations between the two entities. The concordat contains several controversial articles, such as giving the patriarch legal immunity; granting the GOC the exclusive right to staff the military chaplaincy; exempting GOC clergymen from military service; and giving the GOC a unique consultative role in government, especially in the sphere of education. However, many of the controversial articles required parliament to adopt implementing legislation, which was not done by the end of the reporting period. The GOC has a line item in the government budget; it received 25.3 million lari (\$13.3 million) during the year and expected to receive the same amount in 2011.

The Jewish community has been registered as a legal entity for several years, not because it preferred this designation, but because the designation allowed it to repair a synagogue. While the synagogue was not returned to the Jewish community's ownership, the government leased it to the community for the symbolic price of one lari (\$.54) per month. The ability to "lease" the property satisfied investors willing to fund repair work.

The AAC has refused to register as a legal entity, which left it without legal identity. The RCC has registered parts of its community to have legal control over its properties. This registration arrangement gave it physical control over some church buildings and relieved it from the former practice of having to register its religious entities in an individual's name. Nonetheless, the RCC was careful to underline its discontent with the registration options that "deny dignity." Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses shared this complaint.

Government authorities argued that the registration law provided an adequate balance between the demands of religious minorities and the desire to safeguard the special status of the GOC. The government contended that creating a specific status for religious groups would result in unnecessary controversy between groups over what definition was to be adopted and that the registration law effectively leads to equal treatment. In the government's view, the registration law was religion-neutral since its principal concern was only whether an organization was for-profit or not-for-profit. Registered religious groups received substantially the same legal protection of their property rights and tax status as the GOC.

On March 12, a memorandum was signed between the GOC and the Ministry of Corrections and Legal Assistance (MCLA) wherein the sides agreed to cooperate on assigning socially useful labor as a form of punishment to prisoners, including the implementation of this work in churches and monasteries. No other religious organization had such an agreement with the government. According to the MCLA, the GOC plays a role in selecting prisoners for this alternative punishment program.

Under an agreement between the MCLA and GOC, any non-Georgian Orthodox clergy who wished to visit a prisoner needed to first seek permission from the GOC before they could visit the prison. However, the MCLA amended this policy on December 30; it no longer requires that clergy seek the permission of the GOC.

While there are Georgian Orthodox chapels in most prisons, there are no specific nondenominational areas for worship. Representatives from religious minority confessions complained that prisoners of minority faiths were not given adequate areas within the penitentiaries to practice their religious beliefs. Muslim leaders said that prisoners from their community

had their prayer beads and Qur'ans removed by prison officials. During the Muslim holy day of Bajram (September 9), Muslim leaders said prisoners from their community were kept in general cells with other inmates who were smoking, making worship impossible.

However, a new order issued on December 10, under article 2 of the code of imprisonment, explicitly provides for the religious worship of the accused and convicted, including the ability to meet with clergy of any confession, have worship space, and enjoy the right to have religious items.

During the previous reporting period, there were some complaints in connection with the process of postponement of mandatory military service when an Adventist did not address the relevant agency in a timely manner with a request for alternative service and was, therefore, required to serve mandatory military service. According to the PDO, the Adventist completed mandatory military service, not alternative service. However, he benefited from certain privileges due to his religious beliefs, including being relieved from duty on Saturdays for worship.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that during the year four of their members, including three ministers, were fined for not reporting to local military authorities after being drafted for service in the reserves. Jehovah's Witnesses said that the fines were unjustified because the persons had reported to the local military office when called and had submitted all the documentation necessary for affirming their religious affiliation and for requesting to be freed from military service. However, according to Jehovah's Witnesses, the military commissioners reported that the documentation was never presented. In the last week of December, Jehovah's Witnesses sent letters to the Ministry of Defense appealing the fines.

Except for the GOC, restitution of property confiscated during the communist regime remained a contentious issue. During the reporting period, the government did not return any additional churches, mosques, synagogues, or meeting halls. A church in Rabati, in the Akhaltsikhe region, was returned to the RCC in December 2009. By the end of the reporting period, reconstruction had begun. The RCC was not given ownership of the church, but it was able to "lease" the church for a symbolic price for the next 100 years. The main mosque and two synagogues in Tbilisi were operated by their respective religious communities, but they remained state property.

Restoration continued on GOC churches previously returned, in part with government subsidies, on the grounds that the buildings were national cultural heritage sites. The government has provided subsidies for the maintenance and preservation of mosques on similar grounds. Other minority religious groups claimed that the government did not provide funding on a neutral and equitable basis. The AAC complained that its church in Tbilisi, which AAC leaders said serves 100,000 congregants, had not received funding because the AAC refused to register with the government. The Ministry of Culture stated that it cannot fund a renovation project if the church has no legally registered owner.

RCC and AAC officials believed that property disputes were not resolved in a transparent legal process but rather on a case-by-case basis that distinctly favored GOC claims. They claimed that the government was unwilling to resolve disputes over the ownership of disputed church properties for fear of offending GOC constituents. NGOs and members of religious minority groups were also concerned about the maintenance of churches whose title was held by government entities while ownership remained in dispute. Many of the properties were not being maintained and were falling into disrepair.

The AAC's main concern remained the return of five churches in Tbilisi, including Norashen church claimed by both the AAC and GOC and closed since 1995, and one in Akhaltsikhe. However, the status of at least 30 other churches claimed by the AAC remained in dispute.

In November 2009 a disputed church claimed by the AAC collapsed in Tbilisi. The church was used as a warehouse during the Soviet era. The church did not reopen after the country's independence, when title to the property passed to the

Ministry of Culture. The AAC released a statement accusing the government and the GOC of failing to preserve Armenian holy sites. The Tbilisi municipality began cleaning up the site during the previous reporting period. On July 26, the Ministry of Culture began preparatory explorations of the site and dedicated 47,259 lari (\$26,700) to restoration planning. However, the AAC reported that no further action was taken on the church's restoration by year's end.

The RCC, the AAC, and several Protestant denominations continued to have difficulty obtaining permission to construct new churches, due to the reluctance of local authorities to issue building permits that could antagonize local GOC officials.

According to the akhund (spiritual leader) of the Tbilisi mosque Juma, permission to build a community center on private land belonging to a community member remained pending with city authorities at year's end. However, the regional government authorities issued the permit to finish the restoration of a mosque in an ethnic-Azeri village in the Bolnisi district (see section III). Muslims in Ajara also were unsuccessful in regaining ownership of their pre-Soviet era properties. Local officials were unresponsive to repeated requests for the return of the mosques. However, according to a local Muslim leader in Ajara, almost all the mosques were functioning despite lack of ownership by the Muslim community. The public defender noted that during the year several Muslim organizations in Ajara were able to register themselves in the region. Obtaining registration had been difficult for them in previous years.

The former mosque located in the village of Mukhaestate in the Kobuleti region was occupied by local police (in August the mosque was demolished and a new police building constructed in its place), while another mosque in the town of Kobuleti "hosted" a dancing studio. In the Adigeni district, there were approximately seven mosques built by Meskhetian Muslims that were inactive and were being used by others to keep their cattle. The Muslim community (composed mostly of migrants from Ajara) was not able to reclaim those mosques. Meskhetians who returned to the town of Abastumani also requested return of their mosque.

Minority religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to report difficulties obtaining permits to build or occupy houses of worship or to regain control of facilities confiscated during the communist era, although the group no longer considered it necessary to hold services in private homes for security reasons.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that during the year they received five permits for the construction of kingdom halls (places of worship). Four permits were issued to individuals from the community and not to Jehovah's Witnesses as an organization. One permit was issued to Jehovah's Witnesses as an organization for the construction of a community building in Tbilisi. Jehovah's Witnesses applied for permits in the name of individual members because in the past they encountered problems including delays and protests by the local community where they intend to build. At year's end Jehovah's Witnesses had not received an occupancy permit for the newly built administrative building in Tbilisi. They reported that the permit was delayed despite having met all the requirements of the city municipality. During the year Jehovah's Witnesses filed three new construction permit requests, and at year's end all three were pending.

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to have problems with its construction plans for property bought in Tbilisi. The group filed the necessary documents with the Mayor's Office, but permission was denied. In 2008 Jehovah's Witnesses filed an appeal against the Tbilisi municipal administration for denying construction permission. In February 2009 the Administrative Court ruled in favor of the group; the defendants appealed that decision. On February 23, Jehovah's Witnesses again filed a request for a construction permit with the Tbilisi municipality. On August 5, they received the permit but had not begun construction by year's end.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported several problems in the construction of a kingdom hall in Zugdidi, including problems with government construction permits. On July 28, the Zugdidi District Court ruled in favor of Jehovah's Witnesses. On October 15, they received the occupancy permit for this kingdom hall.

Jehovah's Witnesses leaders stated that in the past they were denied access to halls that seated more than 200 persons. They did not attempt to rent or seek access to large halls during the reporting period.

The PDO reported continuing problems with teachers reinforcing Orthodox theology through classroom prayer and the display of icons and other religious symbols in schools. The public defender characterized this problem as especially common in Ajara, where Muslim students were frequently the target of religious pressure from Orthodox teachers. The Ministry of Education has a General Inspection Department to deal with complaints of inappropriate teacher behavior, including violations of the religious freedom of students.

There were no official reports made to the PDO that public school teachers or local Orthodox priests had criticized minority religious groups and interfaith marriages or ridiculed Catholic and Protestant students. However, representatives from the non-GOC confessions and the PDO's Tolerance Center continued to believe that such problems persisted despite the lack of official reports.

School staff assumed a child was Orthodox Christian unless they were made aware otherwise, which can then be the source of difficulty at school. For this reason members of religious minority groups remarked that parents found the school environment better for their children if their household did not announce its religious affiliation in its community.

In November 2009 the government began an investigation into a series of videos posted on Facebook because they allegedly insulted the GOC patriarch. Prosecutors detained and released two individuals and seized computer equipment and videos during the investigation. NGOs and civil society representatives criticized the investigation, stating that it restricted free speech. Later in November 2009 the PDO called on the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the PGO to state publicly under which article of the criminal code the investigation had been launched. According to PDO representative, they did not receive a response to their letter of inquiry. According to the Ministry of Justice, an investigation was launched into an alleged act of persecution, a crime envisaged under the criminal code, and at year's end, no one had been charged and the investigation continued.

The occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia remained outside the control of the central government, and reliable information from those regions was difficult to obtain. A 1995 decree issued by the Abkhaz leader that banned Jehovah's Witnesses in the region remained in effect. Jehovah's Witnesses leaders in undisputed Georgia did not possess current information regarding the situation in Abkhazia.

After several attacks on members of the Muslim community in Abkhazia (see section III), the media reported that on November 2, Vyacheslav Chirikba, "chief" of the de facto foreign policy department of the "presidential" administration, condemned the attacks but called for relevant government agencies to monitor the spiritual life of the state. He was quoted as saying that "we cannot embrace various religious sects. This in particular applies to the penetration of political Islam, Wahhabism, as well as extremist Christian sects, and so on, into Abkhazia."

Baptists, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics reported that they were allowed to operate in Abkhazia, but the GOC reported that it was unable to do so. In 2008 the Russian Holy Synod passed a resolution officially recognizing the GOC's jurisdiction over the dioceses in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, in September 2009 the Abkhaz Orthodox Church declared "independence" from the GOC. On December 22, the GOC announced that jurisdiction for the Abkhaz diocese would fall directly under the patriarch.

In South Ossetia GOC adherents remained unable to hold services in GOC churches located near the ethnic Georgian villages of Nuli, Eredvi, Monasteri, and Gera because these areas were under the control of de facto South Ossetian authorities. Individuals living outside Abkhazia and South Ossetia faced difficulties crossing the administrative boundaries

and, therefore, were limited in their ability to visit the gravesites of family members inside the territories, especially in South Ossetia. Some visits were allowed on an inconsistent basis, especially on religious holidays.

During his speech on International Tolerance Day on November 16, Public Defender Giorgi Tugushi highlighted ongoing problems, including the unresolved ownership status of many churches confiscated from various religious communities during the Soviet period, and acts of aggression by radical Georgian Orthodox groups including the Union of Orthodox Parents and the People's Orthodox Movement. However, Tugushi also noted some areas of improvement, including the successful registration of several Muslim organizations in Ajara and the restoration of a Roman Catholic Church in the Akhaltsikhe Region. In addition the PDO underscored that as of November 16 there had not been a single complaint of ethnic or religious discrimination.

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

There have been reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country in the past, but none during the reporting period.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported an incident in Tbilisi in July 2009 of harassment and physical violence against a member of the community allegedly involving a police officer. The individual filed a complaint, and the investigation was pending at the end of the reporting period. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that they did not receive any information on the results of the investigation at year's end.

There were no reports of abuses, including religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On October 4, government representatives attended a conference on the legal status of religious organizations in the country attended by representatives from almost all the religious confessions. On November 16, the public defender marked international tolerance day honoring civil society actors and organizations working in the field and reported on the state of tolerance in the country. He reported that during the year several Muslim organizations were able to register in the region of the Ajara Autonomous Republic, which had been a problem in the past. He noted that the number of reported attacks on religious minorities to the PDO decreased from more than 25 in 2009 to 10 during the year.

In July members of the Protestant-evangelical religious community were able to rent a large-scale venue, host an event, and advertise on major broadcast channels for the first time.

On August 12, the government convicted eight men, affiliated with a radical Georgian Orthodox group, of hooliganism and obstructing the work of journalists in a May incident at Kavkasia TV (see section III). The men were sentenced to four years and six months in prison.

On December 2, the president, then-minister of reintegration, a vice-speaker of parliament, and various other government representatives attended an event marking the lighting of the second Hanukkah candle. On December 13, the PDO organized a meeting of the religious council including representatives from almost all the religious confessions and the government to discuss the latest challenges in the field. On December 25, the president attended Christmas services at the Roman Catholic Church in Tbilisi and stated, "I want to assure you that each of you should count on the support, love, and assistance of the Georgian state." He also attended service during the Armenian Apostolic Christmas celebration.

An order issued on December 10 under article 2 of the code of imprisonment explicitly provides for the religious worship of the accused or convicted. On December 30, the Ministry of Corrections and Legal Assistance amended a policy to no longer require that representatives from minority religious confessions seek the permission of the Georgian Orthodox Church before attending to members of their community in prison.

### Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were continued reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. There were reports of fatal violence against the Muslim community in the occupied region of Abkhazia, which remains outside the control of the Georgian government. Some persons viewed minority religious groups as a threat to the national church and the country's cultural values.

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, during the year two investigations were opened under article 155 of the criminal code, illegal interference into performing religious rites, and 22 cases were opened under article 156, religious persecution.

On July 10, the media reported, and a NGO working in the area confirmed, that an improvised explosive device was found beneath the vehicle of the imam of Sukhumi in Abkhazia, Saalikha Kvaratskhelia. On July 17, the media reported on the shooting death of Emik Chakmach-Ogly, a member of the Spiritual Board of Muslims in Abkhazia. On October 8, there were reports of more attacks in the occupied region – reportedly one man was killed and two others wounded as attackers fired on a group standing outside a building used by the Muslim community in Abkhazia as a mosque. At year's end there were no reports of suspects named or arrests made.

On July 20, the media reported, and leaders in the Muslim community in Tbilisi confirmed they had heard similar reports, that in the Pankisi Gorge, in a region which borders Russia, Chechen Wahhabis clashed with the local Islamic community, culminating in the destruction of a traditional prayer house.

In an interview on August 30, Elizbar Javelidze, a former Tbilisi State University professor and a member of the radical Georgian Orthodox group Public Orthodox Movement, reportedly said that English-language teachers recruited from other countries by the Ministry of Education were part of a program aimed at destroying the Georgian culture, traditions, and religion, particularly since none, he claimed, were of the Orthodox Christian faith. In an interview on August 28, another Tbilisi State University professor Merab Jibladze reportedly said the teachers were members of a Satanist sect.

On May 7, a discussion on Kavkasia TV's program *Barieri* (Barrier) between leaders of two radical Georgian Orthodox groups and supporters degenerated into a fistfight. On August 12, eight men, affiliated with the radical Georgian Orthodox groups, who were involved in the incident were found guilty of hooliganism and obstructing the work of journalists. The men were sentenced to four years and six months in prison.

Representatives of the Muslim community reported that they believed the permit for construction of their community center was being delayed because of a petition filed with the Tbilisi municipality by the Union of Orthodox Parents (see section 2.b.).

In September 2009 representatives from radical Georgian Orthodox groups prevented repairs on a mosque in a traditionally ethnic-Azeri village. Representatives from the Muslim community reported that during the reporting period the local authorities issued a construction permit for the mosque restoration. Construction was concluding at year's end, despite the vigil kept by the radical group to prevent work on the mosque.

During the year Jehovah's Witnesses reported 12 new cases of societal abuses against them: one case was closed by the court following an agreement between the parties; one case was closed after the defendant signed a document promising not to insult Jehovah's Witnesses again; four cases were closed after the courts supported the conclusion of the police that no crime had been committed; and there was no response in the remaining six cases.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that in the past, owners of large facilities would not rent to them. They did not attempt to rent large halls during the reporting period.

The RCC reported that in the southern region of Adigeni, as well as in the city of Akhaltsikhe, Roman Catholics faced a hostile environment.

The PDO reported that it was approached 10 times by religious minorities concerning possible instances of violations of their rights during the year. Police were quick to respond to incidents of abuse but slower to pursue investigations.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy engaged with religious communities from all faiths. Embassy officials, including the ambassador, frequently met with representatives of parliament, religious groups and leaders, and NGOs concerned with religious freedom. The embassy promoted religious freedom and tolerance through the use of public diplomacy, including speeches and press interviews by senior U.S. government officials and embassy representatives.

On July 28, the ambassador met with the head of the Tbilisi mosque to discuss community issues. On August 9 to 11, the ambassador visited the predominantly ethnic Armenian and, therefore, Armenian Apostolic region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, where he met with NGO and government representatives. He also met with the head of the AAC in the predominantly ethnic Armenian city of Akhalkalaki. Embassy officials regularly traveled to the region and met with local government officials and civil society representatives to discuss community matters. On September 16, embassy representatives again met with the head of the Tbilisi mosque as well as imams from throughout the country to discuss religious freedom problems in light of the controversy surrounding Qur'an burning in the United States.

On October 4, embassy staff attended a conference attended by representatives of almost all religious confessions in the country on the problem of legal status of religious organizations. On October 26, the deputy chief of mission and embassy staff met with representatives from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee working in the country to discuss their work and matters of religious freedom within the Jewish community. On October 27, embassy representatives attended a presentation by the Christian Democratic Party on Islamic cultural traditions in Ajara. In November embassy representatives attended a conference on Armenian issues in the country including those surrounding the AAC. On October 6, the United States and Georgia conducted an omnibus meeting of the Strategic Partnership Commission that included a discussion of human rights and democratic development, including topics related to religious freedom.

In December embassy staff participated in Hanukkah celebrations on two different occasions with leaders from the community. On December 13, embassy representatives attended the PDO's religious council meeting, which included most religious confessions in the country, to discuss topics of concern to the communities. On December 10, the ambassador, along with the ambassadors of France, the EU, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and Sweden, hosted a reception in honor of Human Rights Day that included religious leaders. On December 17, embassy staff traveled to the Muslim and ethnic Azeri region of Kvemo Kartli and attended a conference on Muslim women's matters. On December 20, the ambassador held a live Web cast on human rights including religious freedom problems.

Embassy officials promoted dialogue between the government and ethnic and religious minority communities and their integration into society. The embassy provided small grants to local NGOs working on minority problems and monitoring the government's implementation of the National Integration and Tolerance program.

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