



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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16 April 2003

### GGA40074.E

Georgia: Treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses by police and Georgian society in general (update to GGA 33443.E of 7 January 2000).

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

Article 19 of the Constitution of Georgia, adopted on 24 August 1995, states that all persons have the right to freedom of religion and that "[t]he persecution of an individual for his thoughts, beliefs or religion is prohibited as is compulsion to express opinions about them" (Georgia 24 Aug.1995).

According to a 2002 report on Georgia on the Amnesty International Website, "radical" supporters of the Orthodox Church have attacked members of Jehovah's Witnesses, and in many cases, police have failed to protect the victims or have allegedly been accomplices to the violence (AI 2002). The report refers to a specific attack on 28 September 2001 in which a group of approximately 100 people, set up a roadblock near the town of Marneuli where Jehovah's Witnesses were meeting (ibid.). At the roadblock the Jehovah's Witnesses were dragged from their buses and beaten while the police allegedly stood by and watched (ibid.).

A 2003 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report on Georgia stated that police and courts grant impunity to civilian militants who attack Jehovah's Witnesses (2003). The same report states that a member of parliament urged his supporters to pursue "ultra nationalist causes by demonizing Jehovah's Witnesses" (ibid.). The report also refers to a draft law offered by the Georgian government to remedy religious violence (ibid.). HRW's position is that the law, provides for further discrimination by instituting a "restrictive registration regime and a clause outlawing 'improper proselytism'" (ibid.). The report details the trial of Vasili Mkalavishvili (a defrocked Orthodox priest), who had organized "dozens of attacks" on Jehovah's Witnesses in and around Tbilisi since 1999 (ibid.). The report states "Mkalavishvili's followers were allowed to dominate the courtroom and intimidate the victims" to the point where they were afraid to attend subsequent proceedings (ibid.).

A 4 April 2003 press release on the Jehovah's Witnesses' Office of Public Information Website, states that, on 31 March 2003, Mkalavishvili's trial was postponed for the 18th time since 25 January 2002 (Jehovah's Witnesses 4 Apr. 2003). A January 2003 press release also issued by the Jehovah's Witnesses states that members of "the ultra-orthodox organization 'Jvari'" attacked a congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Rustavi (ibid. 30 Jan. 2003). In their 2002 report on Georgia, Human Rights Watch stated that authorities in Georgia have allowed "organized groups of civilian militants" to perpetrate a campaign of violence against Jehovah's Witnesses by (2002). The report further states that attackers have disrupted religious services, assaulted worshipers, looted homes and destroyed religious materials (ibid.).

Following a February 2001 Supreme Court decision that deregistered the Jehovah's Witnesses as a legal entity attacks on adherents increased (ibid.). According to a 2002 statement on religious freedom in Georgia by Human Rights Watch, of the over 100 attacks on religious minorities in the two-and-a-half-year period prior to its statement, only one resulted in a criminal trial (12 Sept. 2002). The statement reported that, because the Georgian government had failed to act, religious intolerance had escalated from an "isolated stronghold of intolerance" in Tbilisi to a nationwide problem (ibid.).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

### References

Amnesty International. 2002. *Amnesty International 2002 Report*. "Georgia."  
<<http://web.amnesty.org/web/ar2002.nsf/eur/georgia!Open>> [Accessed 8 Apr. 2003]

Georgia. 24 August 1995. Constitution of Georgia.  
<[http://www.parliament.ge/LEGAL\\_ACTS/CONSTITUTION/consten.html](http://www.parliament.ge/LEGAL_ACTS/CONSTITUTION/consten.html)> [Accessed 11 Apr. 2003]

Human Rights Watch. 2003. *Human Rights Watch World Report 2003*. <<http://hrw.org/wr2k3/europe7.html>> [Accessed 8 Apr. 2003]

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Jehovah's Witnesses. 4 April 2003. Office of Public Information. "Mkalavishvili Prosecution Stalls Again." <[http://www.jw-media.org/newsroom/index.htm?content=/region/europe/georgia/english/releases/intolerance/geo\\_e030404.htm](http://www.jw-media.org/newsroom/index.htm?content=/region/europe/georgia/english/releases/intolerance/geo_e030404.htm)> [Accessed 8 Apr.2003]

\_\_\_\_\_. 30 January 2003. Office of Public Information. "Violent Religious Intolerance Remains Unchecked in Georgia." (press release).<[http://www.jw-media.org/newsroom/index.htm?content=/region/europe/georgia/english/releases/intolerance/geo\\_e030404.htm](http://www.jw-media.org/newsroom/index.htm?content=/region/europe/georgia/english/releases/intolerance/geo_e030404.htm)> [Accessed 8 Apr. 2003]

#### Additional Sources Consulted

IRB databases

#### **Internet sites, including:**

CIPDD

International Crisis Group

Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

U.S. Department of State

Watchtower

#### **Search engine:**

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