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11 March 2004

GGA42396.E

Georgia: Treatment of members of the Pentecostal Church; relationship between the Pentecostal Church and the Georgian Orthodox Church
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

Unofficial 2003 estimates of the number of Pentecostals in Georgia suggest there to be between 5,000 and 6,000 adherents (UN 16 Dec. 2003, Para. 58-59). Among the Pentecostal Churches serving Georgia are the Swedish-based Word of Life with 10 congregations and approximately 600 adherents (*ibid.* Para. 59; KNS 11 Jan. 2002); the Assemblies of God (AG Sept.-Oct. 2001; UN 16 Dec. 2003, Para. 59), and the approximately 5,000 members Pentecostal Union (Forum 18 25 Sept. 2003; UN 16 Dec. 2003, Para. 4, 58), which is also known as the Russian Pentecostals (HRW 20 Oct. 2003).

Religious Freedom in Georgia

The United States Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report 2003* stated that the status of religious freedom in Georgia was poor (2003 18 Dec. 2003, Introduction). Georgia is the only former communist country to not have a law on religion and the only one to regularly witness religiously motivated mob violence (KI Autumn 2003, 2-3). Since 1999 (UN 16 Dec. 2003, Para. 61), Georgian vigilantes have led attacks on religious minorities, including acts of violence, seizure of religious materials and the disruption of religious proceedings in an environment of "near impunity" (IRFR 2003 18 Dec. 2003, Introduction). Human Rights Watch (HRW) has since described the violence as an entrenched pattern that is not limited to Tbilisi but occurs throughout the country (20 Oct. 2003). Levan Ramishvili, director of the Georgian NGO Liberty Institute, stated in 2003 that "various officials, police officers, politicians and members of the 'fundamentalist wing' of the Georgian Orthodox Church either condone or effectively support religious oppression" (Eurasianet.org 30 Oct. 2003). In 2003, HRW accused Georgian media of demonizing religious minority groups (20 Oct. 2003). For example, members of the Word of Life Church have "been the subject of offensive and slanderous articles in the Georgian press" (UN 16 Dec. 2003, Para. 59).

Many Georgians view the Protestant confessions as "taking advantage of the populace's economic hardship by gaining membership through economic assistance to converts" and some view them "as a threat to the national Church and the country's cultural values" (IRFR 2003 18 Dec. 2003, Sec. III). Furthermore, the Keston Institute argued that since vigilante actions affects only a small proportion of the society and the majority of citizens are concerned with issues related to their low standard of living, there is little social concern for religious minorities (KI Autumn 2003, 8).

In January 2004, the Georgian religious minority community observed that since November 2003 and the government transition from Eduard Shevardnadze to Mikhail Saakashvili (as detailed in GGA42294.E of 26 January 2003), there have been no major cases of religious violence (Forum 18 23 Jan. 2004). Although seeing the lack of violence as a positive sign, minority church leaders believe it too early in the Saakashvili period to consider religious violence at an end (*ibid.*).

Attitude of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate (GOP)

The GOP is the only religious community that has legal status and other religious communities have "no juridical recognition" (Forum 18 25 Sept. 2003). In general, the GOP is critical toward the practices of other religious minorities in Georgia (KI Autumn 2003, 6; UN 16 Dec, 2003, Para. 36-37). Although church leaders have attempted to maintain a distance from religiously motivated violence, the Keston Institute reported that "[m]any of the attacks on religious minorities are led by Orthodox clergy (Autumn 2003, 3).

Reports quote the GOP using inflammatory language in describing non-traditional religious activities in Georgia (KNS 13 Feb. 2002; *ibid.* 11 Jan. 2002) or refer to its priests leading protests against Pentecostals (Forum 18 23 June 2003; KI Autumn 2003, 3). For example, the Rustavi-based Metropolitan Atanase Chakhvashvili, "the second most senior Orthodox bishop" (KI Autumn 2003, 6), stated that members of non-traditional or "sectarian" religions, including Pentecostals, "'have to be shot dead'" (KNS 13 Feb. 2002). Chakhvashvili later renounced his comments (*ibid.* 8 July 2002) and the Patriarchate condemned the remarks (*ibid.* 13 Feb. 2002). Before this statement, in August 2001, the press office of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate stated: "'Be it known that some

sectarians, Pentecostals, Charismatics and Disciples of Christ hold their meetings at the Iveria cinema.... Be it known that everyone who attends them destroys his own soul and is doomed to eternal torments" (KNS 11 Jan. 2002).

Extremist Organizations

Reports identify the followers of Basili Mkalavishvili, otherwise known as Basilists, and the group Jvari (Cross) as two extremists groups linked to the GOP and who have engaged in attacks on Pentecostal as well as other religious minorities (IRFR 18 Dec. 2003, Sec. II; KNS 22 Oct. 2002; Forum 18 5 Nov. 2003). The International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF) described the attackers as using "exceptionally brutal methods, such as beating believers with clubs and sticks spiked with nails" (15 July 2003, 26).

The Gladi district, Tbilisi-based (Forum 18 16 June 2003) Mkalavishvili is a defrocked Georgian Orthodox priest who now serves the Greek Old Calendarist Metropolitan Cyprian (KI Autumn 2003, 3; KNS 22 Oct. 2002). The aforementioned Metropolitan Chakhvashvili was reportedly a supporter of Basilist actions (KNS 13 Feb. 2002) and Mkalavishvili has obtained religious and political support for his anti-religious minority activity (ibid. 22 Oct. 2002). This includes police assistance in rounding up targets (for example stopping a bus carrying adherents of non-traditional religions) and that the news media have televise attacks live after receiving forewarning from Basilists (ibid.).

KNS accuses Mkalavishvili or his followers of over 100 attacks on religious minority communities between 1999 and 2002 (ibid.), targeting mainly Jehovah's Witnesses and periodically, Pentecostals, Baptists and other religious organizations (ibid. 26 Sept. 2001). A characteristic Basilist incident is a mob-style swarming attack with physical assaults of congregation members, vandalism of church and personal property and looting (ibid. 22 Oct. 2002; ibid. 8 July 2002). Mkalavishvili was brought to trial in late 2002 where he faced charges related to five violent attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, the Georgian Ombudsman's office and a newspaper's office (ibid. 22 Oct. 2002). As of November 2003, the trial was ongoing (Forum 18 5 Nov. 2003).

Forum 18 describes Jvari leader Paata Bluashvili as a "violent self-appointed Orthodox vigilante" (ibid.). At least two Rustavi-based Pentecostal congregations claim that Jvari members harassed and threatened them (Forum 18 5 Nov. 2003). On 4 November 2003, a Rustavi court issued a suspended sentence to Bluashvili and two other Jvari members and sentenced two others to prison for their roles in two violent attacks on Jehovah's Witness meetings (ibid.).

Treatment of Pentecostals

The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Abdelfattah Amor, stated that Pentecostals were "often persecuted ... [and] face substantial difficulties in assembling to practice their religion" in Georgia (16 Dec. 2003, Para. 58). Numerous reports refer to violent attacks on Pentecostal adherents in Georgia (KNS 22 Oct. 2003; ibid. 8 July 2002; IRFR 2003 18 Dec. 2003, Sec. II; Forum 18 5 Nov. 2003). Reports linked the aforementioned extremist groups to attacks on Pentecostal congregations in May 2003 (ibid.), in July 2002 (KNS 8 July 2002) and in April 2002 (CIPDD 8 May 2002) as well as to several attacks in 2001 (KNS 11 Jan. 2002; ibid. 26 Sept. 2001; ibid. 28 Mar. 2001). In general, the attacks resulted in congregation members being beaten and church property ransacked and robbed (ibid. 8 July 2002; ibid. 11 Jan. 2002; ibid. 26 Sept. 2001). While most cases took place in the Gladini and Nadzaladevi districts of Tbilisi (Forum 18 23 June 2003; ibid. 16 June 2003; Imedi 20 July 2003; KNS 8 July 2002; ibid. 11 Jan. 2002; ibid. 26 Sept. 2001; ibid. 28 Mar. 2001), reports also mention Kutaisi (CIPDD 8 May 2002) and Rustavi as scenes of violence (Forum 18 5 Nov. 2003).

In March 2001, a mob swarmed eight visiting pastors from the United States and South Africa in Gldani (KNS 28 Mar. 2001). Local inhabitants have obstructed Pentecostals from entering their places of worship and threatened members and priests (Imedi 20 July 2003). In August 2001, police, armed locals and Orthodox clergy threatened organizers of children's camp located in the village of Bakhmaru near Kutaisi (KNS 26 Sept. 2001). Organizers decided to close the camp to avoid bloodshed (ibid.).

Particularly targeted in 2002 and 2003, was Pastor Nikolai Kalutsky's Russian-language congregation in Tbilisi (Forum 18 23 June 2003). In July 2002, Basilists entered Kalutsky's house while he was holding a religious service and assaulted the congregation, vandalized the home and looted valuables (KNS 8 July 2002). Mobs blocked his home-services in October 2002 and on four occasions between April and late-June 2003 (Forum 18 23 June 2003; ibid. 16 June 2003). As a result of these blockades, the Gladini-Nadzaladevi police chief banned Kalutsky from holding further services in his home (ibid. 23 June 2003). As of January 2004, the ban remained in effect (ibid. 23 Jan. 2004) for Kalutsky and his approximately 30 parishioners (ibid. 23 June 2003).

State Protection

Eurasianet.org reported in October 2003 that victims of violence found it "almost impossible to rouse police or politicians to assert minority religious rights" (30 Oct. 2003). Georgian police and security services were unable or refused to protect religious minorities from attacks" (IRFR 18 Dec. 2003, Introduction, Sec. II). Courts have dismissed complaints against "police and other officials in spite of overwhelming evidence of their complicity in attacks (IHF 15 July 2003, 26). In at least one case, hospitals have refused to treat those injured in extremist attacks once they learned that they were Pentecostals (KNS 11 Jan. 2002).

Recent reports suggest that police have been actively involved in violent suppression of religious groups (Forum 18 16 June 2003; IRFR 18 Dec. 2003, Introduction, Sec. II; UN 16 Dec. 2003, Para. 63), harassing congregational members (CIPDD 8 May 2002) or abetting violent vigilante forces (KNS 26 Sept. 2001). For their part, politicians are calculatingly reluctant to condemn the violence (Eurasianet.org 30 Oct. 2003) because, according to observers, taking sides on this issue has political risks (ibid. 20 Aug. 2002). Suffice to say, according to the Keston Institute, "[i]t is clear that significant numbers of those who should be protecting citizens' rights to freedom of expression and assembly are failing to do so..." (Autumn 2003, 8).

Police investigations are "typically ... slow, ineffective or non-existent and have rarely result[ed] in indictment" (IHF 15 July 2003, 26). HRW described them as "shockingly lax" and resulting in a "culture of impunity" (20 Oct. 2003) and two reports claimed that none of the over 700 criminal complaints filed since 1999 by victims of religiously based attacks in Georgia have resulted in punishment (KNS 22 Oct. 2002; IRFR 18 Dec. 2003, Sec. II).

However, it has also been reported by Keston that members of the Nadzaladevi congregation, which a mob attacked in July 2002, credited the police response with calming the mob and preventing further violence (KNS 8 July 2002). In a December 2001 case, the pastor of a victimized Word of Life congregation credited police with preventing attackers from accessing all rooms where services were being held (ibid. 11 Jan. 2002). However, in both cases advocates criticized police on their lack of a follow-up investigation (ibid.; ibid. 8 July 2002).

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.

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