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GEORGIA: Racist vigilantes again blockade Pentecostal church

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

Racist language was again used yesterday (13 July) when self-appointed vigilantes blockaded a home in the capital Tbilisi to prevent a Russian-language Pentecostal church from meeting for the sixth Sunday in a row. "You Russians clear off back to Russia and do whatever you like there!" and "Sectarians, clear off out of Georgia!", Pastor Nikolai Kalutsky – a Georgian citizen – quoted the demonstrators as telling him. But Georgia's ombudsman has failed to support the church. "Services in the house were noisy – they sing loud hymns. This is a residential area. That's why the neighbours are complaining," Nana Devdariani told Forum 18 News Service from Tbilisi on 14 July.

More than one year after such blockades began, self-appointed racist vigilantes again blockaded a home in the capital Tbilisi yesterday (13 July) to prevent a Russian-language Pentecostal church from holding its Sunday service. Pastor Nikolai Kalutsky told Forum 18 News Service from Tbilisi on 13 July that vigilantes had blockaded his home for three hours earlier in the day. "During this confrontation, believers – including myself – were subjected to verbal and physical attacks," he reported. "The police prevented the mob from seriously beating us, but they didn't do anything to allow the believers through." Kalutsky – who is a Georgian citizen – quoted the protestors as uttering racist remarks: "You Russians clear off back to Russia and do whatever you like there!" and "Sectarians, clear off out of Georgia!"

The protestors also issued scarcely-veiled threats: "Other people will come who will not hold back!" and "We will come back at night when the police aren't here and attack you and your children." Seven of Kalutsky's twelve children still live at home.

Pastor Kalutsky said that as before the protestors told him they were Orthodox and were maintaining the blockade to prevent non-Orthodox religious events from taking place.

However, Georgia's ombudsman Nana Devdariani rejected claims that the mob was deliberately targeting non-Orthodox worship. "Services in the house were noisy – they sing loud hymns. This is a residential area. That's why the neighbours are complaining," she told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 14 July. "There is no blockade." She said her officials had visited the church and found services "not loud, but loud enough". Told that there had not been any services for a year she declared: "They went earlier than that. We have been working on this for three years."

She admitted that all her recent information had come from television reports, adding that she had heard nothing about racist chants and had seen no Orthodox priest organising the demonstrations. "I don't have the impression the crowds are fanatics."

Devdariani said she could not understand why, if Pastor Kalutsky has any complaints, he has not come to her office. "When the True Orthodox Church was destroyed by a mob in Shemokmedi last year, they came to us within half an hour."

The Pentecostal church has not been able to meet together as one for more than a year because of continued obstruction. Small groups of church members have been able to meet quietly in homes, though even then Pastor Kalutsky says many are "scared". He said a group of young men came to one small home meeting in early June and threatened the church members never to meet again. "They warned them that if there are any further meetings they will find out where they are being held."

In the wake of the latest blockade of the church's Sunday service, the sixth blockade in a row since 8 June (see F18News 23 June 2003), Pastor Kalutsky has written a letter of complaint to Tbilisi's chief procurator, Tengiz Makharadze, detailing the "difficult circumstances" for his church.

"For a prolonged period that began on 5 July 2002 and which continues to the present, our community has suffered unceasing attacks from local people and groups organised by priests of the Georgian Orthodox Church," he told the procurator. He cited the repeated blockades, in which he claims Orthodox priests took part, as well as the injury his wife Vera sustained to the head during a mob attack on their home on 6 July last year. He said the church had tried to find an alternative place to worship as some of the congregation were too frightened to try to attend services at his home, but could not find anywhere suitable.

Pastor Kalutsky called on the procuracy to get involved "as numerous appeals to the police have not achieved the expected result".

Indeed, the police chief for the Tbilisi district of Gldani-Nadzaladevi, Temur Anjaparidze, told Forum 18 on 23 June that he would not allow the Kalutskys to use their home as a church. However, when Kalutsky visited the police station on 12 July to ask again for protection for the service, Anjaparidze conceded that he had the constitutional right to hold religious meetings at his home.

In a 24 June appeal to human rights groups and foreign embassies in Tbilisi, Pastor Kalutsky had called on them to help his church achieve security in its own church building, build a church elsewhere "that would satisfy all parties" or to grant political asylum abroad. In early July Pastor Kalutsky wrote to President Eduard Shevardnadze. He told Forum 18 he has had no responses to any of these letters.

The mob blockades of the Pentecostal church are believed to be organised by Fr David Isakadze, Orthodox priest in the nearby village of Dighomi, although he denied this to Forum 18 on 23 June.

Georgia has seen unprecedented levels of vigilante violence against religious minorities in the past four years. Baptists, Pentecostals, Catholics, True Orthodox and Jehovah's Witnesses have suffered from mob attacks, organised by self-appointed Orthodox vigilantes. Despite more than 100 attacks – and the perpetrators being well-known to the public and the police – no-one has yet been prosecuted, leaving many to believe that they enjoy state-backed immunity.

The best-known organiser of such attacks, Fr Basil Mkalavishvili of the Old Calendarist Church, was ordered by a Tbilisi court on 4 June to be detained for three months (see F18News 5 June 2003). In early July the Media News agency reported one of his parishioners Vakhtang Dadunadze as declaring that Fr Mkalavishvili has fled Georgia and is now either in Bulgaria or in Greece, though he said he still directs his congregation in the Tbilisi district of Gldani, sending instructions from his place of refuge.

But Devdariani believes such rumours are being put about by Mkalavishvili in the hope that the police will give up the search for him. "He is here – that's the impression I have." Asked when she believed he would be arrested, she told Forum 18: "He should have been arrested long ago."

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