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GEORGIA: True Orthodox fear church-destroyers will escape justice

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

True Orthodox leaders have expressed concern that the apparent closure of the criminal investigation into those guilty of destroying a True Orthodox Church in the village of Shemokmedi in south western Georgia last October will allow them to escape punishment. Deputy procurator Pridon Chanturia ordered the case to be closed on the grounds that "it was impossible to identify the organiser, encourager or perpetrator of the aforementioned criminal act". However, the chief procurator of Ozurgeti district, Yakov Iadolidze, categorically denied to Forum 18 News Service that the investigation has stopped. "The guilty will be prosecuted and there will be a criminal trial." But True Orthodox priest Fr Gela Aroshvili rejected Iadolidze's claim that the case was continuing. "He's lying. If that's so, why did they send us the 18 January decision declaring that the case was being closed?"

True Orthodox leaders have expressed concern that the apparent closure of the criminal investigation into those guilty of destroying a newly-built True Orthodox Church in the village of Shemokmedi in south western Georgia last October will allow them to escape punishment. In a decision dated 18 January but which was given to the True Orthodox only in late March, deputy procurator of Ozurgeti region Pridon Chanturia ordered the case to be closed on the grounds that "it was impossible to identify the organiser, encourager or perpetrator of the aforementioned criminal act". However, the chief procurator of Ozurgeti district, Yakov Iadolidze, categorically denied to Forum 18 News Service that the investigation has stopped. "The guilty will be prosecuted and there will be a criminal trial," he pledged on 7 April. "Phone me in a week's time when the final result of the investigation will be ready – we will know then who the guilty are."

Fr Gela Aroshvili, a True Orthodox priest from the capital Tbilisi, rejected Iadolidze's claim that the case was continuing. "He's lying," he told Forum 18 on 7 April. "If that's so, why did they send us the 18 January decision declaring that the case was being closed?"

But Iadolidze was adamant. Asked why Chanturia had issued the decision, he responded: "Chanturia retired last month. He doesn't work here any more. I am the chief procurator for Ozurgeti district and the investigation has been suspended, not closed. It is continuing." He said procurator Petre Salukhvadze was now handling the case in the wake of Chanturia's retirement.

"In spring 2002, about ten residents of Shemokmedi village, who became convinced that the Georgian Patriarchate is not in accordance with Orthodox belief, and that the former is in heresy, decided to build a house of worship in the centre of the village, near the secondary school, on private land belonging to citizen Pridon Uchadze," Chanturia declared in his 18 January decision.

"The residents of Shemokmedi village protested against the building of a church with unacceptable religious beliefs next to the centuries-old real Orthodox church of Shemokmedi. On 6 October 2002, the residents convened a council, where the construction of the house of worship was condemned and hundreds of people went to destroy the building." He then went on to claim that, given the alleged impossibility of identifying the perpetrators, "it was not possible to bring to justice a concrete person or group of persons" and criminal case No. 5602859 was therefore closed.

Otari Babunashvili, a True Orthodox layman from Tbilisi, complained to Forum 18 on 3 April that Chanturia's decision "looked more like a religious discussion than a procurator's report".

The destruction of the Shemokmedi church by a mob of some 50 people with a mechanical digger was filmed by local television station Rustavi-2. "We gave the tape to the procuracy - you can see clearly on it who destroyed our church," Fr Aroshvili told Forum 18. The True Orthodox claim the head of the village administration and other local officials took part, together with people from other nearby villages brought in by the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate. They claim the police merely stood by and watched.

The True Orthodox do not believe anyone will ever be prosecuted for the church destruction. "We expected the case to be closed, of course," Fr Aroshvili told Forum 18. "Investigations in Georgia always finish in the way the state wants."

The True Orthodox parish continues to meet for worship despite the destruction of their church, Fr Aroshvili reports. He said some

30 parishioners, plus children, meet for prayers in a private home "like the early Christians". Whenever he can afford the petrol, Fr David Giorgadze travels the 70 kilometres (45 miles) from Kutaisi to serve the liturgy and Fr Aroshvili's brother, fellow priest Fr Zurab Aroshvili, sometimes travels there from Tbilisi.

Fr Aroshvili pledged to take the case to the general procuracy in Tbilisi and inform the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The Shemokmedi parish belongs to a jurisdiction of the True Orthodox Church that owes allegiance to Metropolitan Ephraim (Spanos), who is based in Boston in the United States. It has four parishes in Georgia, in Shemokmedi, Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Abastumani.

Under the controversial concordat between the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate and the state, signed last October, the Patriarchate has a monopoly on describing itself as "Orthodox" and has the power of veto over all places of worship built in the country, including those of other denominations or faiths.

Georgia has been plagued in recent years by violence by self-appointed guardians of "Orthodoxy" against religious minorities, all of whom appear to enjoy tacit immunity. The trial of violent Old Calendarist priest Fr Basil Mkalavishvili, who has led and participated in many of the more than 100 violent attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, Pentecostals and human rights activists (see F18News 25 March 2003), was postponed for the eighteenth time on 31 March. The Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that the judge allowed the postponement so that Mkalavishvili could pray and fast during Lent. The trial is scheduled to resume on 29 April.

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