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ABKHAZIA: "Of course" authorities won't defend Georgian monks and nuns

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Two monasteries of Georgian Orthodox monks and nuns in the Upper Kodori Gorge, captured by Abkhaz forces from Georgian forces in mid-August, are being pressured by the Abkhaz Orthodox Church to change their jurisdiction. "They must submit to the authority of our Church or leave Abkhazia," the head of the Abkhaz Orthodox Church, Fr Vissarion Apla, who visited the monks and nuns within days of the fighting, told Forum 18 News Service. Asked who had given him the right to pressure members of a different religious jurisdiction to submit to his authority, Fr Apla responded angrily: "It's not your business. It's our territory." Abkhaz Deputy Foreign Minister Maxim Gvinjia backs the right of the Abkhaz Church to enforce its will on the monks and nuns. "Of course we won't defend their rights, given the context of current developments," he told Forum 18. "Abkhazia is a Christian Orthodox country and the Abkhaz Orthodox Church is the main church." Since the expulsion of a Georgian Orthodox priest in April, the two monasteries are the only remaining Georgian Orthodox institutions left in Abkhazia.

As Abkhaz Orthodox leaders insist to Forum 18 News Service that a group of Georgian Orthodox monks and nuns in the north-east of Abkhazia must submit to their jurisdiction or leave Abkhazia, the unrecognised territory's Deputy Foreign Minister Maxim Gvinjia has told Forum 18 that the authorities will do nothing to protect the monks' and nuns' rights to religious freedom. "Of course we won't defend their rights, given the context of current developments," he told Forum 18 from the capital Sukhum (Sokhumi in Georgian) on 4 September. "We're not deporting them - they're being given the option of submitting to the Abkhaz Orthodox Church if they want to remain to serve the people here."

The Georgian Orthodox monks of St George Monastery and nuns of St Nino Convent live in the village of Ajara (Gulripsh District) in the Upper Kodori Gorge. Upper Kodori was the only part of Abkhazia that remained under the control of the authorities in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, until recently. However, the area was captured by Abkhaz forces in an operation that began on 12 August. Abkhaz and Russian media reports say the monks and nuns hid in a cave during the fighting.

Forum 18 was unable to reach the monks and nuns to find out their reaction to the pressure to change their jurisdiction or leave their monasteries. The Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate in Tbilisi referred Forum 18 to Metropolitan Daniil (Datuashvili), the exiled head of its Abkhazia diocese and to whom the monks and nuns are subject, but he was unavailable on 2 and 3 September. However, one Georgian Orthodox from Abkhazia told Forum 18 on 3 September that the monks and nuns are under such heavy pressure from the Abkhaz that it would cause them further problems were they to be contacted.

Abkhazia has remained out of the control of the Tbilisi authorities since a bitter war in the early 1990s, which the Tbilisi authorities lost. Almost all ethnic Georgians fled Abkhazia in the wake of the war. The Republic of Abkhazia has been recognised only by Russia.

Although tens of thousands of ethnic Georgians still live a precarious existence in Abkhazia, mostly in Gali District in the south, the Abkhaz authorities have prevented the Georgian Orthodox Church from ministering there. The only Georgian priest in Abkhaz-controlled territory until the capture of Upper Kodori, Fr Pimen Kardava, who was serving in his native Gali District, was expelled on orders from the Abkhaz Orthodox Church in April. The Abkhaz State Security Service (SSS) enacted the expulsion, but denied any involvement to Forum 18 (see F18News 23 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1118).

In the wake of Fr Kardava's expulsion from Gali, Georgian Orthodox told Forum 18 that many local Georgians boycott the priest named by the Abkhaz Orthodox, Fr Matvei Tuzhba. "People don't go to him," one told Forum 18. "Many can't even understand Russian, the language he speaks. They can't and won't confess to him and have nowhere to go to church." The source said the only possibility of participating in church life is when local Georgians cross over into Georgian-controlled territory.

"We have lost our one and only priest there," the source added, "but even then one was not enough. But how can our Patriarch name ten priests when even one is not allowed?"

The monastery and convent in Ajara remain the only Georgian Orthodox institutions still functioning on Abkhaz-controlled territory.

The weekend after the Abkhaz capture of Upper Kodori, the monks and nuns were visited by a delegation led by Fr Vissarion Apla, the head of the Abkhaz Orthodox Church, a jurisdiction that is not recognised by the canonical Orthodox Churches, although the Russian Orthodox Church has provided it with some practical support. The Georgian Orthodox Church regards Abkhazia as an integral part of its canonical territory.

After initially denying that he had travelled to Ajara to pressure the monks and nuns to submit to his Church, Fr Apla eventually confirmed it. "We went to serve a moleben (prayer service) there in the wake of the fighting and discovered there were monks and nuns there," he told Forum 18 from Sukhum on 3 September. "We discussed with them how they could continue here on the territory of the Abkhaz Orthodox Church."

Fr Apla and his delegation offered the monks and nuns the possibility of joining the Abkhaz Orthodox Church or becoming a representation of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarch Ilya II on Abkhaz Orthodox territory (which would be tantamount to their recognising that Abkhazia is not the canonical territory of the Georgian Patriarchate). "We gave them a free choice," he claimed to Forum 18. "They must submit to the authority of our Church or leave Abkhazia."

Fr Apla declined to tell Forum 18 what the response of the monks and nuns had been to his demands. However, the Abkhaz government press agency Apsnypress reported on 18 August that the monks and nuns said they would consult their church superiors and give their response "in the near future".

Asked what would happen if the monks and nuns continue to recognise the authority of the Georgian Patriarch, Fr Apla responded: "Let them pray in Tbilisi. The monasteries were founded only ten years ago, specially to cause a scandal. They want to stage a political show."

Asked who had given him the right to pressure members of a different religious jurisdiction to submit to his authority, Fr Apla responded angrily: "It's not your business. It's our territory."

The Abkhaz presidential spokesperson Kristian Bjanja was quoted on the presidential website on 16 August denying that the monks and nuns had been pressured over their choice of jurisdiction. He blamed the "Georgian propaganda machine" for such "false reports".

Gvinjia, the Deputy Foreign Minister, insisted to Forum 18 that the Abkhaz government "does not get involved in religious issues". "We can't influence the church. Abkhazia is a Christian Orthodox country and the Abkhaz Orthodox Church is the main church," he maintained. "All other religious communities – including Catholics, Muslims and Lutherans – all submit their documents to the Abkhaz Orthodox Church as the main religious community. This is the framework that operates here, as in all countries of the world."

Asked why one religious community has to submit to another religious community and how this fits with Abkhazia's Constitution - which guarantees religious freedom and recognises human rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - Gvinjia insisted: "This is how it is in every country of the world."

While claiming that Abkhazia respects religious freedom, Gvinjia continued to defend the 1995 presidential decree banning the Jehovah's Witnesses, which he said is still in force (see F18News 23 April 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1118). (END)

More coverage of freedom of religion or belief in Abkhazia is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=25>.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

A printer-friendly map of Georgia, including Abkhazia (whose extent in the north-west is not marked), can be found at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=georgi>.

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