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GEORGIA: Scepticism greets new pledges to end religious violence

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

Minority religious leaders and human rights activists remain sceptical that new pledges from political leaders to end the long-running religious violence and punish the perpetrators will bring justice to the victims. Pledges made by President Eduard Shevardnadze have been echoed by Security Council secretary Tedo Japaridze. "I have no doubt that the perpetrators of this violence will be punished," he told Forum 18 News Service. Prosecutor general Nugzar Gabrichidze was equally confident. "The perpetrators are not above the law," he told Forum 18. "I give a guarantee that if the victims of the violence go to court the perpetrators will be sentenced within one or two days." Levan Ramishvili of the Liberty Institute was highly sceptical. "President Shevardnadze's apology at the ecumenical service was positive, but came too late," he told Forum 18. "There is no willingness on the part of the government to end the persecution."

Minority religious leaders and human rights activists remain sceptical that new pledges from Georgia's political leaders to end the long-running religious violence and punish the perpetrators will bring justice to the victims of the more than one hundred attacks since 1999. Pledges made by President Eduard Shevardnadze at a rescheduled ecumenical Christian service on 14 March (see separate F18News article) have been echoed by the secretary of the Georgian Security Council Tedo Japaridze. "I have no doubt that the perpetrators of this violence will be punished," he told Forum 18 News Service from Tbilisi on 25 March. Prosecutor general Nugzar Gabrichidze was equally confident. "The perpetrators are not above the law," he told Forum 18 the same day. "I give a guarantee that if the victims of the violence go to court the perpetrators will be sentenced within one or two days."

Most critical of the authorities' claims to be tackling the violence was Levan Ramishvili, director of the Tbilisi-based Liberty Institute, which has defended religious minorities and was itself the victim of violence from a mob last July. "President Shevardnadze's apology at the ecumenical service was positive, but came too late," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 25 March. "There is no willingness on the part of the government to end the persecution."

Genady Gudadze, head of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia, withheld any verdict on the president's promises. "The statements sound wonderful but in practice no-one has been sentenced for the violence," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 25 March. "The government must work to bring its practice into line with its promises."

Even Malkhaz Songulashvili, head of the Baptist Union and host of the 14 March ecumenical service attended by the president, remained to be convinced that the high-level pledge to end the religious violence would lead to prosecutions of the perpetrators. "I am not one hundred per cent sure," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 25 March. "What I felt from the president's words is that any new cases of violence will be prosecuted. But I didn't have the feeling that those who have already committed violence will be put in jail immediately."

Ramishvili said the trial of one leader of the violence, the Tbilisi-based Old Calendarist priest Basil Mkalavishvili, is continuing as before, "but with no progress". Likewise, the trial of Paata Bluashvili, leader of the ultra-Orthodox group Jvari in the town of Rustavi south east of the capital, is making little progress. Neither has been arrested.

Ramishvili termed Jvari "a criminal organisation". "They hide behind patriotic statements, but they have engaged in violence, such as attacking a Jehovah's Witness convention in Gori. They should be in prison – all of them." He said Jvari activists were the chief suspects in the attack on his institute. He added that he believes the group was set up by senior police officers, notably Soso Alavidze. Alavidze, a former chief of the Rustavi and then Tbilisi police, is now head of public relations at the mayor's office in Rustavi.

Gudadze told Forum 18 that both Bluashvili and Mkalavishvili not only organised and led the attacks on their communities but personally participated. "They didn't just lead them but joined in the beatings."

Mkalavishvili's trial began in Tbilisi's Didube-Chugureti District Court on 25 January 2002 but was postponed on numerous occasions. At first the case included three attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses (one of which took place in the public defender's office),

one on the Baptists and one on the newspaper Rezonansi. The Baptists and Rezonansi withdrew from the case, leaving only the three Jehovah's Witness incidents. Mkalavishvili faces charges under articles 120 (causing light injuries), 125 (beatings), 155 (illegally hindering religious activity), 226 (hooliganism) and 256 (persecution) of the Criminal Code.

"The Mkalavishvili case is due to resume on 31 March," Gudadze told Forum 18. "Although the case has been in court for more than a year they have not even begun to hear testimony from victims." He said court officials had promised to arrange adequate security when the trial resumes. "They have promised more than 50 police officers. That will be enough. Although we are likely to be verbally abused, we will turn up." He said at some hearings in the past it had been impossible for the Jehovah's Witnesses to attend because of the lack of security.

Bluashvili's trial in Rustavi, set to begin on 26 or 27 March, covers several of the most serious attacks by Jvari on Jehovah's Witness meetings, including an attack in Marneuli in 2001 and attacks in Rustavi that year and in 2002.

Despite the failure to secure any prosecutions over the more than one hundred attacks, Japaridze of the security council is convinced the perpetrators will be brought to justice. "The case is quite strong now," he told Forum 18. "It is a good question why they have not been prosecuted so far, but there is no doubt they will be punished." He said that the government could not directly intervene in a legal case, but it was aware that the country could be expelled from the Council of Europe if it failed to punish the perpetrators. Although he claimed to be confident that justice would be done he declined to give any time frame.

Prosecutor general Gabrichidze denied that Mkalavishvili had escaped prosecution so far because the government was afraid of him. "He is not above the law. No-one is afraid of anyone, least of all of Mkalavishvili." Gabrichidze put more of the blame for the failure to see the perpetrators prosecuted on the victims. "The victims failed to turn up in court," he told Forum 18. "The procuracy is doing everything." Told that the Jehovah's Witnesses and other victims had earlier been reluctant to turn up in court without guarantees of adequate police protection, he responded: "They shouldn't be afraid. We give a guarantee we will give them police protection. Maybe there was an atmosphere of intimidation in the court-room, but there won't be in future."

Gudadze takes some comfort from the fact that there have been no attacks on Jehovah's Witness communities since 30 January, when Bluashvili led an attack on a meeting in Rustavi. A day earlier one of Mkalavishvili's victims, Giorgi Meparishvili, was confronted in Tbilisi by two unknown men carrying handguns. He was injured during his escape. "Something has changed ever so slightly since the president's statements."

However, Songulashvili points out that the Baptist Betheli centre now being built in Tbilisi was raided by a mob led by the parliamentary deputy Guram Sharadze on 12 February. "The mob tried to enter the building, but our people didn't let them in." He said the police were called but the mob eventually disappeared. "I heard later from officials that the raid was related to the talks I held later that day with the visiting rapporteurs of the Council of Europe," he told Forum 18. He pointed out that the local police chief and other officers had raided the centre in January and insulted the Baptists.

Although violent attacks have tailed off in the past month, many believe it is only a temporary respite. In an interview in the weekly paper Asaval Dasavali (News from Here and There) of 17-23 March, Mkalavishvili pledged to resume his fight when Lent is over, promising that 50,000 Orthodox would take to the streets to fight against "sectarian, Satanic meetings".

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