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GEORGIA: After four years of attacks, a suspended sentence is given

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

Religious minorities in Georgia have welcomed the first criminal punishment given in four years of unpunished violence by self-styled Orthodox vigilantes, Forum 18 News Service has been told, even though the jail sentence given is a suspended sentence. However the sentenced attacker has told Forum 18 that he is innocent, that Jehovah's Witnesses violently assaulted him contrary to their past record, and that he will lodge court appeals by the end of this week. The sentenced attacker has a long record of leading raids on private flats and beating up individual believers, often working together with similarly violent Tbilisi-based Old Calendarist priest Basili Mkalavishvili, who is still free.

After enduring four years of unpunished violence by Orthodox extremists, religious minorities have welcomed the conditional sentence handed down yesterday (4 November 2003) on violent self-appointed Orthodox vigilante Paata Bluashvili and four associates. The five were sentenced only for some of their violent attacks on Jehovah's Witness meetings, although they have also been involved in a string of other attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses and on Protestants. But Bluashvili is unrepentant. "We have material proving that we are 100 per cent innocent," he told Forum 18 News Service on 5 November from Rustavi, an industrial town south east of the capital Tbilisi. "The Jehovah's Witnesses beat us," he claimed. He said he and his colleagues from the Jvari (Cross) organisation, would be lodging appeals, by the end of this week, to the Tbilisi regional court.

"We are not overjoyed - it would have been better if they had gone to prison - but we believe this is a good verdict," the Jehovah's Witness' lawyer Manuchar Tsimintia - who represented the victims in court - told Forum 18. "The conditional sentences mean that, if they do anything at all, now they will immediately be sent to prison." Malkhaz Songulasvili, head of the Baptist Church in Georgia, also welcomed what he called "the belated but expected verdict". "This is a very positive sign - this is the first time anyone involved in religious violence has been punished."

Nikolai Kalutsky, the Tbilisi-based pastor of a Russian-language Pentecostal denomination, with an affiliated congregation in Rustavi which has been threatened by Jvari members, greeted the sentences. "This is the first verdict of this type," he told Forum 18 on 5 November. "This verdict will, we hope, bring people to their senses and help to restrain such violence in future."

Another Protestant pastor, whose congregation in Rustavi has also been threatened, told Forum 18 that the verdict was a "good beginning". "We disagree with the Jehovah's Witnesses' theologically, but beating people up and breaking up meetings must be punished."

The trial of the five - which began at Rustavi city court in April - related to seven violent attacks on Jehovah's Witness meetings in Rustavi and Marneuli. "Dozens of our people were injured and hundreds were threatened and insulted," Tsimintia reported. Victims of the violence were regularly insulted in court by Bluashvili and his supporters. (At one hearing in another case last January, Bluashvili punched Tsimintia in the face in the hallway of the court.)

Bluashvili was given, by Judge Giorgi Chemer, a four years suspended jail sentence, as were two associates. Two further associates received sentences of two years' imprisonment. The judge suggested to Tsimintia that he should not attend court on 4 November to hear the verdict, for his own safety.

However, last month a court sent back for further investigation a separate case against Bluashvili related to the breaking up of two congresses in Gori and Kaspi. "More than one hundred people took part in those attacks, but for some reason only Bluashvili was charged," Tsimintia complained.

Bluashvili, who describes himself as an artist, told Forum 18 that he is a member of the St Nicholas parish of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate. Patriarchate spokesman Giorgi Andriadze declined to make any comment on the verdict. Also withholding comment, for the moment, was Tamaz Papuashvili, who is responsible for religious affairs in the State Chancellery.

Rustavi was known as an atheist town during the communist period with almost no places of worship. "It was a Komsomol town,"

Kalutsky declared, "and that spirit lives on." When the Lutherans opened a church in the town in spring 2001, a local Orthodox priest immediately visited to find out who they were, telling them that they should not be allowed, Tbilisi-based Lutheran pastor Garri Azikov told Forum 18. The Lutherans responded that, if he wanted to know who they were, he could phone the Ministry of Justice or the Patriarchate. Azikov said. Neither the priest nor Bluashvili have troubled the congregation again.

As early as April 2001 Bluashvili was leading attacks on Jehovah's Witness meetings, raiding private flats and beating individual Jehovah's Witnesses. He has often worked together with Tbilisi-based Old Calendarist priest Basili Mkalavishvili, who is also the subject of a long-running but so far inconclusive trial (see F18News 5 June 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=72). Forum 18 has learnt that he is currently in Tbilisi's 8th hospital, undergoing medical treatment, though officials claim they cannot find him.

In May this year, Bluashvili and six colleagues raided a private flat where a Pentecostal congregation was meeting, Kalutsky reported, warning them that if they ever caught them meeting again they would be beaten. Bluashvili denied to Forum 18 that this attack had taken place.

Another Protestant community, which does not want to be identified, said it too had to keep changing the venue of its meetings after being threatened. "We can't rent any buildings there and it is difficult even meeting in private flats," the pastor told Forum 18. "It was better under communism."

Oleg Khubashvili, head of the Pentecostal Union, told Forum 18 that they have a church, but cannot have a notice outside to say that it is a church. "There is not enough freedom in the town for that."

Malkhaz Sanguashvili of the Baptist Church regards the Bluashvili verdict as the follow-up to promises made by President Eduard Shevardnadze, in March 2003, that all those guilty of violent attacks on religious minorities would be brought to justice (see F18News 25 March 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=16). "We were expecting an immediate police and procuracy response," he added. "But the state chancellery told us they would only take action after the 2 November parliamentary elections." He said the verdict - handed down two days after the election - was "a landmark".

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