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GEORGIA: Should violent Orthodox group be banned?

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

Opinions on whether Jvari, a self-styled Georgian Orthodox organisation that has been terrorising religious minorities, should be banned are divided. Human rights activist Levan Ramishvili told Forum 18 News Service that "More important is for its members to be prosecuted.". Members of minority faiths – speaking on condition of anonymity – and western diplomats told Forum 18 that Jvari should have been banned when it began its reign of terror against religious minorities. But diplomats privately expressed little hope to Forum 18 that the authorities would take steps to prosecute those responsible for hundreds of violent attacks against Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants. Jvari's leader, Paata Bluashvili, told Forum 18 "We're just defending our faith. The Jehovah's Witnesses and all these other groups are criminal sects – they should be banned."

Opinions are divided over whether a violent self-styled Orthodox organisation that has been terrorising religious minorities in the industrial town of Rustavi (Rust'avi) close to the capital Tbilisi should be banned. Five members of Jvari (Cross) were sentenced on 4 November for their role in attacking Jehovah's Witness meetings. "I can't say if a court should ban them or not – that is a question for the judges," Tamaz Papuashvili, the country's senior religious affairs official, told Forum 18 News Service in his office at the State Chancellery in Tbilisi on 6 November. "There is a big difference between an organisation that violates the law and a criminal organisation." Others are more clear-cut. "Of course it's a criminal organisation," Levan Ramishvili, director of the Liberty Institute, told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 6 November. "But banning it would be only a symbolic gesture and I don't believe in banning organisations. More important is for its members to be prosecuted."

Members of several minority religious faiths – who feel intimidated under pressure from years of violence by self-appointed Orthodox vigilantes – told Forum 18 on condition of anonymity that Jvari should have been banned long ago when it began its reign of terror against religious minorities in Rustavi and the surrounding area. Western diplomats in Tbilisi privately echoed this view to Forum 18, but expressed little hope that the authorities would have the courage to take this and other steps to prosecute those involved for hundreds of violent attacks.

"Jvari is registered as a patriotic, cultural and sporting organisation. In practice its aim is to persecute followers of other faiths," Mikhail Beroshvili, deputy head of the NGO Caucasian Home, told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 5 November. His colleague Anna Abramishvili agrees. "Jvari is a very reactionary organisation. It wants the Orthodox Church to be cut off from outside contact and persecutes Jehovah's Witnesses and others." Although pleased that some of Jvari's members have been sentenced, they believe the failure to ban the organisation sends a signal that violence is tolerated.

But Jvari's leader, Paata Bluashvili, vigorously denied that Jvari is a criminal organisation. "We're just defending our faith. The Jehovah's Witnesses and all these other groups are criminal sects – they should be banned," he told Forum 18 on 13 November from Rustavi.

Bluashvili, was among the five members sentenced on 4 November to suspended prison terms for their violence against Jehovah's Witness meetings in Rustavi and Marneuli (see F18News 5 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=176). Bluashvili also faces a further trial for leading violent assaults on two Jehovah's Witness conventions in Gori and Kaspi. However, no criminal cases have been launched against Bluashvili or any of his associates for a string of other attacks against Protestant churches in the town, or for attacks against other Jehovah's Witness meetings.

Bluashvili identified Metropolitan Atanase Chakhvashvili of Rustavi and Marneuli as one of the co-founders of Jvari in 1998. The group was registered the same year as a non-governmental organisation at Rustavi city court, legal status it retains to this day despite its violent activity. Bluashvili said that Metropolitan Atanase, an old man, does not play an active role in the organisation. He identified Fr Teimuraz, priest of St Nicholas' parish in Rustavi, as Jvari's spiritual father, a role he has had since the organisation was founded.

Papuashvili, who heads the Religion and National Development Department at the State Chancellery, openly admits that Jvari members are involved in criminal activity. "They issue calls to violence. I met them many times and told them they shouldn't do this." But he said he is not able to make any public statement on whether he believes the group should be banned as this would constitute undue pressure on judges. He agrees that the attacks on religious minorities represent "a question of criminality" and

admits that the criminal code is not being enforced.

Fr Basil Kobakhidze, a Patriarchate priest who is at odds with the current fundamentalist mood dominant among the Patriarchate leadership, argues that his Church must take responsibility for the violence Jvari and individuals within the Church have perpetrated against religious minorities. He stresses that the preamble to Jvari's statute describes it as an Orthodox organisation. "One of Jvari's cofounders is Metropolitan Atanase - under canon law he leads the organisation," Fr Basil told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 5 November. "The Patriarchate has clear responsibility."

Yet the chief spokesman at the Patriarchate, Zurab Tsokhvrebade, claimed that it has nothing to do with Jvari. "The Patriarchate doesn't approve of or support the methods this organisation uses," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 13 November. "The Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church has always condemned all violent methods against any sectarian organisation." However, he said the Patriarchate had no view on whether Jvari should be banned or not, declaring that it was a question for the courts.

Tsokhvrebade said the Patriarchate had no information on any role Metropolitan Atanase or Fr Teimuraz might be playing in Jvari.

A printer-friendly map of Georgia is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=georgi>

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