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GEORGIA: Police chief bans Pentecostal church

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

Local police chief Temur Anjaparidze says he will not allow Pentecostal pastor Nikolai Kalutsky to use his home in Tbilisi as a church. "It's not fair on the neighbours," he told Forum 18 News Service on 23 June. "The neighbours won't allow this. What can I do?" His comments came the day after the Pentecostal church was again blockaded by neighbours and self-appointed Orthodox vigilantes, who also made racist remarks to the ethnic Russian pastor. Fr David Isakadze, priest in the nearby village of Dighomi suspected of being behind the repeated mob blockades, denied any involvement. "I have no role in this whatsoever," he told Forum 18, despite appearing to be well-informed about the protests.

The Orthodox priest suspected of being behind the repeated mob blockades of a Pentecostal church in the capital Tbilisi has denied that he has anything to do with the protest. "I have no role in this whatsoever," Fr David Isakadze, priest in the nearby village of Dighomi, told Forum 18 News Service on 23 June. While police looked on, a large mob of neighbours and self-appointed Orthodox vigilantes from further afield blockaded Pastor Nikolai Kalutsky's church yesterday (22 June) for the fourth time since services resumed on 27 April. Fr Isakadze, who admitted he had visited Pastor Kalutsky's home last July "to discuss religion with him", appeared well-informed about the protest but insisted Forum 18 was "asking the wrong person". "You should ask the neighbours." The local police chief has now banned the church from meeting in the Kalutsky home.

During the blockade on 15 June, Pastor Kalutsky and his wife Vera both reported, a member of the mob telephoned a Fr David "time and again", apparently to seek advice (see F18News 16 June 2003). Vera Kalutskaya says that two Orthodox priests visited some neighbours on the evening of 20 June, two days before the most recent blockade. "She thinks it was for reconnoitring or instruction," Emil Adelkhanov of the Tbilisi-based Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development reports, adding that she has "no direct evidence" that Fr Isakadze was one of them.

And, in a new development, the police chief for the Tbilisi district of Gldani-Nadzaladevi, Temur Anjaparidze, has told Forum 18 that he will not allow the Kalutskys to use their home as a church. "No-one is stopping them from living there," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 23 June, "but I won't allow them to use their home for religious services." Asked why the Kalutskys cannot invite whom they like to their home he replied: "Five hundred people twice a week? It's not fair on the neighbours. The neighbours won't allow this. What can I do?" Asked whether he did not have a duty to protect individuals and their rights, Anjaparidze angrily responded: "I have the duty to defend the rights of all citizens, but I don't have to defend myself before you." He then put the phone down.

On 22 June, as had happened the previous Sunday, the mob arrived in the street where the church is located before 9 am and blockaded it with their cars, Adelkhanov told Forum 18 from Tbilisi that day, citing information from Pastor Kalutsky. At about 10 am some 30 Pentecostals arrived for the Sunday service but were stopped by an outnumbering crowd of "Orthodox zealots". To avoid a scuffle, Kalutsky asked the Pentecostals to leave, which they did.

The police came when the Pentecostals had left. They tried to persuade the picketers to leave but they persisted, suspecting that the Pentecostals might come back. The police also told Pastor Kalutsky that some neighbours had complained that he preached in the street, something he denies. "We were not ordered to disperse the mob," the police reportedly told him. "We were ordered to see that it didn't come to blows."

Pastor Kalutsky quoted a picketer as having told him, in reference to his Russian ethnicity: "You are a guest here. Haven't you stayed here enough? Go wherever you like." Kalutsky responded: "Where should I go? Will you leave us in peace if we hold our meetings on the desert shore of the Tbilisi Sea [an artificial lake near the capital]?" The answer was, "We won't."

Adelkhanov reports that the picketers also threatened to beat a correspondent of Rezonansi newspaper who had written a report about the 15 June blockade.

Part of those talks took place in the presence of reporters from Mze TV who arrived soon after the police. One of the picketers said to the cameraman: "We do not want him to deprave our children. We do not want his children to play with ours." While leaving, they warned, as they had done the previous Sunday, "We'll be back." And one of them added, "This is the last time we let you off."

Next time I will stop at nothing."

The Russian-language Pentecostal church meets in a building in Kalutsky's yard. The church insists it has to meet there as it has been barred from renting any local buildings at affordable rates.

While Fr Isakadze admitted he had visited the Kalutsky home on 2 July last year, Forum 18 was unable to ask him if he had led the mob raid on the house four days later during which Kalutsky's wife Vera was concussed, leaving her in hospital for three days. Fr Isakadze had put the phone down. On that second occasion, a mob picketed their house for three days continuously.

In what Kalutsky describes as a "horrible year", the church had to halt its Sunday services after 25 October, when a mob blockaded the church and prevented Kalutsky's guests from arriving for his birthday party. "I had to promise the police to stop our meetings for six months," Adelkhanov quotes Kalutsky as reporting.

The church resumed its Sunday services on 27 April this year and the first four services went off undisturbed. But the 24 May, 1 June, 15 June and 22 June services could not take place because of the mob. "After the meeting of 1 June was foiled too, the district police promised Kalutsky not to let such things happen again. Indeed, the meeting of 8 June went off calmly," Adelkhanov notes.

Asked how he knew so much about the blockade if he claimed he was not involved, Fr Isakadze told Forum 18: "I know because parishioners of mine who live there came and told me." While admitting that he had visited Kalutsky's home without an invitation last July, he said it was "a lie" that Vera Kalutskaya had been injured in the clash. And he added: "Nikolai – or whatever his name is – is cynically misusing religion."

Forum 18 was unable to ask Fr Isakadze why Kalutsky and other members of his church could not enjoy their rights to freedom of religion and freedom of assembly as he resolutely refused to discuss the case further and had put down the phone. Nor was Forum 18 able to ask whether he condemned the racist nature of some of the comments addressed to Kalutsky by the mob.

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