

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

GEORGIA: APPEAL CASES

19 December 2001¹; AI Index: EUR 56/018/2001; public
Further information on Appeal Case sheets EUR 56/006/2001 (2 April 2001)
and EUR 56/013/2001 (19 September 2001)

Police allegedly support attack on Jehovah's Witnesses by radical supporters of the Georgian Orthodox Church

In February 2001 radical supporters of the Georgian Orthodox Church attacked a congregation of around 300 Jehovah's Witnesses that was gathering for a religious meeting in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia. The Jehovah's Witnesses report that a number of their members were beaten by the radical Orthodox Church supporters who were led by defrocked Georgian Orthodox priest named Basil Mkalavishvili, and furthermore that they were aided, and joined, in the attack by some police officers.

Amnesty International (AI) has received a significant number of reports on attacks on religious minority groups by radical Orthodox Church supporters in Georgia over the last few years. The organization is particularly concerned at the apparent impunity of the attackers as well as police officers who allegedly failed to protect the believers or even joined in the attacks. AI has frequently called on the Georgian authorities to open prompt and impartial investigations into the attacks with the results published and those found responsible brought to justice.

At ten o'clock in the morning on 27 February 2001 the Jehovah's Witnesses gathered in a courtyard in Isansky District in Tbilisi. About an hour later a TV crew of the Georgian TV channel *Rustavi II* reportedly entered the premises unannounced and filmed the gathering. At twelve o'clock *Rustavi II* is said to have broadcast a program about the meeting including giving information where it was being held. Shortly afterwards police arrived at the courtyard stating that they had come to protect the congregation in case of an attack. At about two o'clock the Jehovah's Witnesses were warned that the Orthodox Church supporters led by Basil Mkalavishvili were heading towards the courtyard. Jehovah's Witness Rudolf Mikirtumov reports that he went to the police who were waiting on the street and asked them to protect the congregation. Reportedly, a police officer laughed at him and said: "Do you think we want them to beat us too?"

When the Orthodox Church supporters came and urged the Jehovah's Witnesses to open the gate to the courtyard, they refused to let them in. Subsequently, a group of men in plainclothes climbed over the wall and made their way into the courtyard. Some of them are said to have stated that they were



Photo: Jehovah's Witness Rudolf Mikirtumov was beaten by radical supporters of the Georgian Orthodox Church and sustained a bruise under his right eye as a result. Police allegedly supported the attackers. © Amnesty International

¹ Please use this Appeal Case sheet as the basis for your letter-writing until further notice.

policemen and one of them reportedly showed his official documents to prove that he was a police officer. The intruders are said to have opened the gate from inside and let in the radical Orthodox Church supporters and the rest of the police. In the meantime, women and children had managed to escape across a wall at the back of the courtyard. When entering the courtyard Basil Mkalavishvili reportedly shouted: "I have come to show you the true religion!" Then he and his followers began to beat members of the congregation. According to Jehovah's Witnesses present at the meeting, some of the policemen joined the attackers in the beating of the congregation. Rudolf Mikirtumov states that a policeman threatened him: "I'll remember your face. You'll see the sky through [prison] bars."

After the beatings were over, the attackers are said to have looted the site, taking away those possessions that the Jehovah's Witnesses had to leave behind. On the next day, policemen reportedly approached the owner of the courtyard. Allegedly, they wanted him to testify that he hadn't given the Jehovah's Witnesses permission to use the courtyard, but that they had taken it by use of force.

Background information:

Jehovah's Witnesses have frequently been a target for violence by radical supporters of the Georgian Orthodox Church in several cities in Georgia, often led by defrocked Georgian Orthodox priest Basil Mkalavishvili. In many of the incidents police are said to have failed to protect the believers, or even, to have participated in physical and verbal abuse.

Complaints lodged by the Jehovah's Witnesses against Basil Mkalavishvili after an attack on a congregation in October 1999 are still being investigated and no criminal proceedings against him have yet come to court.

The case against two female supporters of Basil Mkalavishvili was sent back by the judge for further investigation at a trial in August 2000, even though the women reportedly admitted to their part in the attack. In the meantime, Mirian Arabidze, a Jehovah's Witness, and Zaza Koshadze who had attended the religious gathering in October 1999 were convicted of "hooliganism" and sentenced to probationary terms of three years and six months respectively at a trial that took place in September 2000.

On 16 March 2001 the Procurator General of Georgia reportedly issued an instruction for an investigation to be carried out by Tbilisi city procuracy into allegations of violence carried out by Basil Mkalavishvili and his followers. However, to our knowledge there have yet to be any successful prosecutions of those alleged to be responsible for the catalogue of assaults, in spite of extensive eye-witness and video evidence.

Apart from attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses, other minority religions such as Baptists and Pentecostals have also become targets of violence. "Nobody has been punished for any of the attacks on religious minority groups. This apparent impunity encourages further violence against Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minority groups in Georgia," said Arno Tungler, representative of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia, in an interview with AI in March 2001. Basil Mkalavishvili repeatedly publicly stated that after "having dealt" with the Jehovah's Witnesses he would move on to other minority faiths.

Recommended action:

Please send politely worded
~~Whom to write~~ in English, Georgian,
 Russian or your own

<small>Language</small> President of Georgia: Eduard Shevardnadze	Procurator General: Nugzar Gabrichidze	Minister of the Interior: Koba Narchemashvili	City Procurator: Tengiz Makharadze
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Send copies of your letters to:

- Chair of the parliamentary Committee for Human Rights in Georgia, Elene Tevdoradze:

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- the Ambassador of Georgia to your country (if there is one)

KEYWORDS: RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE1 / ATTACKS / RELIGIOUS GROUPS - JEHOVAH'S WITNESS / RELIGIOUS GROUPS - ORTHODOX / IMPUNITY / POLICE / PHOTOGRAPHS

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