

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

GEORGIA: APPEAL CASES

2 April 2001¹; AI Index: EUR 56/006/2001; public

Police allegedly support mob attack on Jehovah's Witnesses

On 27 February 2001 a mob of 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 mob, led by defrocked Georgian Orthodox priest named Basil Mkalavishvili, and furthermore that the mob were aided, and joined, in the attack by some police officers.

At ten o'clock in the morning 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 the case of an attack.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia have been attacked by radical supporters of the Georgian Orthodox Church on a number of occasions before (see below). At about two o'clock the Jehovah's Witnesses were warned that a radical Orthodox mob led by Basil Mkalavishvili was 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 mob 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 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 mob 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 the mob began to beat members of the congregation. According to Jehovah's Witnesses present at the meeting, some of the policemen joined the mob 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."

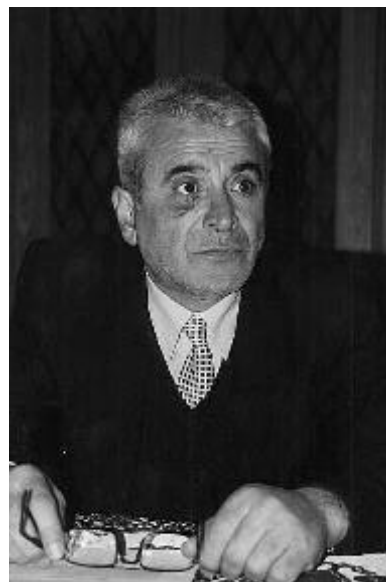


Photo: Jehovah's Witness Rudolf Mikirtumov was beaten by radical supporters of the Georgian Orthodox Church and sustained a bruise under his right eye as a result. Police allegedly supported the mob.

© Amnesty International

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

After the beatings were over, the mob is 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. 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 of Basil Mkalavishvili and his followers. 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, Jehovah's Witness Mirian Arabidze 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.

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. 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 letters in English, Russian, Georgian or your own language,

- urging the authorities to open a prompt and impartial investigation into allegations that the police did not protect the Jehovah's Witnesses at their meeting on 27 February 2001 and that some policemen even actively supported the mob, including by beating members of the congregation;
 - urging the authorities to inform you of the findings of the investigation and to bring those found responsible to justice;
 - stating that impunity for policemen who refuse to protect victims of ill-treatment or join in violent actions against them themselves gives a wrong signal to society;
 - To stress your point remind the authorities of their obligations to prohibit torture under international human rights treaties such as the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.
-

Whom to write

| President of Georgia: | Procurator General: | Minister of the Interior: | Procurator of Isanky District: |
|---|---|--|--|
| Eduard Shevardnadze Gruziya; 380018 g. Tbilisi; pr. Rustaveli, 8; Apparat Prezidenta Gruzii; Prezidentu Shevardnadze, E.A.; GEORGIA Fax: + 995 32 - 99 96 30 / 99 08 79 / 98 23 54 E-mail: office@presidpress.gov.ge | Gia Meparishvili Gruziya; 380033 g. Tbilisi; ul. Gorgosali, 24; Prokuratura Gruzii; Generalnomu prokuroru; Meparishvili, G.; GEORGIA Fax: + 995 32 - 98 21 70 | Maj.-Gen. Kakha Targamadze Gruziya; 380014 g. Tbilisi; ul. Generala Gia Gulua, 10; Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del Gruzii; Ministru Maj.- Gen. Targamadze, K.; GEORGIA Fax: + 995 32 - 99 95 24 e-mail: jashi@iberiapac.ge | Gruziya; g. Tbilisi; Isanky rayon; Rayonnaya Prokuratura; Prokuroru; GEORGIA |

Send copies of your letters to:

- the Ambassador of Georgia to your country (if there is one)
- Tbilisi city procuracy; Procurator: Tengiz MAKHARADZE:

Gruziya
g. Tbilisi 380059
Digomsky massiv, P kvartal
Prokuratura g. Tbilisi
Prokuroru

MAKHARADZE T.
GEORGIA