

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

GEORGIA: APPEAL CASES

19 December 2001¹; AI Index: EUR 56/016/2001; public
Further information on Appeal Case sheets EUR 56/003/2001 (2 April 2001)
and EUR 56/011/2001 (19 September 2001)

Police allegedly fail to protect Jehovah's Witness congregation against attack by radical Georgian Orthodox Church supporters

On 17 October 1999 radical supporters of the Georgian Orthodox Church are said to have attacked a congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses and beat them with iron crosses and wooden clubs. The police reportedly refused to come to their help.

Some 120 Jehovah's Witnesses had gathered in a rented theatre in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, to hold a Sunday service. Around 200 supporters of a radical defrocked Georgian Orthodox priest named Basil Mkalavishvili reportedly broke up the meeting and assaulted members of the congregation verbally and physically. Some adherents escaped during the attack and reported it to two local police stations, but police allegedly refused to come to their aid or provide protection. Sixteen worshippers are said to have needed hospital treatment as a result of the attack.

Jehovah's Witness Fati Tabagari, for example, suffered a temporary loss of vision after she was struck on her head. Fati Tabagari told AI:

"When they found religious literature in my bag, they began to shout at me and one of them hit me with all his might. He hit my face, my eyes. I tried to hide my face with my hands. Blood was running down my fingers. I felt that I was losing consciousness."



Photo: Fati Tabagari suffered a temporary loss of vision after she was struck on her head by radical supporters of the Georgian Orthodox Church. More than a year later the wounds have healed but her vision will never be fully restored, Fati Tabagari reports.

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After the attack Fati Tabagari was reportedly brought to hospital suffering from a concussion and serious injuries to one of her eyes.

Fati Tabagari told an AI representative in March 2001 that since lodging a complaint on 17 October 1999 with the authorities regarding the attack on Jehovah's Witnesses the same day in Tbilisi, she still had not received any response.

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

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

- expressing concern at allegations that the police did not protect Jehovah's Witnesses when they were attacked by followers of Basil Mkalavishvili on 17 October 1999;
 - stating that impunity for police officers who fail to protect victims of ill-treatment as well as impunity for individuals who lead or participate in attacks on members of religious minority groups gives a wrong signal to society;
 - asking the authorities to inform you whether any investigation is being conducted into the allegations, and urging them to bring those found responsible to justice;
 - To stress your point remind the authorities of their obligations to prohibit torture and ill-treatment 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.
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Whom to write

President of Georgia:	Procurator General:	Minister of the Interior:	City Procurator:
Eduard Shevardnadze	Nugzar Gabrichidze	Koba Narchemashvili	Tengiz Makharadze
Gruziya; 380018 g. Tbilisi; pr. Rustaveli, 8; Apparat Prezidenta Gruzii; Prezidentu Shevardnadze, E.A.; GEORGIA	Gruziya; 380033 g. Tbilisi; ul. Gorgosali, 24; Prokuratura Gruzii; Generalnomu prokuroru; Gabrichidze, N.; GEORGIA	Gruziya; 380014 g. Tbilisi; ul. Generala Gia Gulua, 10; Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del Gruzii; Narchemashvili, K.; GEORGIA	Gruziya; 380059 g. Tbilisi; Digomsky massiv, 2-oy kvartal; Prokuratura g. Tbilisi; Prokuroru MAKHARADZE T.; GEORGIA
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Send copies of your letters to:

- Tbilisi city procuracy; Procurator Ramaz Khmaladze:

Gruziya;
g.Tbilisi;
Gldani rayon;
Rayonnaya Prokuratura;
Prokuroru Khamaladze, R.;
GEORGIA

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

Gruziya
380018 g. Tbilisi
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- Human Rights Ombudsperson in Georgia, Nana Devdariani:

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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 / POLICE / PHOTOGRAPHS
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PLEASE SEND ANY REPLIES FROM THE GEORGIAN AUTHORITIES AS SOON AS POSSIBLE TO THE INTERNATIONAL SECRETARIAT OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL. (South Caucasus and Central Asia Research and Campaign Team; Amnesty International; 1 Easton Street; London WC1X ODW; United Kingdom)