



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

Georgia

Georgia – GEO38824 – Jehovah's
Witnesses – Harassment – State Protection

31 May 2011

1. What is the current situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia? Are they subject to violence or other harassment and, if so, are they likely to receive protection from authorities?

The Georgian Orthodox Church is the main religion in Georgia (accounting for around 84 per cent of the population) and holds a unique legal status, protected as both a church and public entity. All other religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, may register as non-commercial private entities, such as a union or foundation, to receive legal status and tax benefits. Jehovah's Witnesses comprise less than one per cent of the population in Georgia.¹

Information indicates that while the Government generally respects religious freedom in practice, Jehovah's Witnesses still suffer from prejudice and harassment in Georgia. There have been a number of reports of violence and intimidation against Jehovah's Witnesses in recent years. The legal status of the Church also allegedly leads to discrimination in property ownership and development. There are reports that authorities have failed to respond adequately to incidences of violence and intimidation against Jehovah's Witnesses and that law enforcement officials may be involved in acts of harassment.

A Council of Europe parliamentary report from March 2011 indicates that Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia suffer from a lack of proper legal recognition as well as prejudice and harassment from mainstream society. According to the report, acts of harassment do not appear to be properly followed up and investigated by authorities. The report states:

137. The issue of religious tolerance and the situation and status of other faiths in Georgia is an important subject and still a point of concern. The Georgian Orthodox Church is the main religion in Georgia. The Church is protected as both a church and a public entity. Other religious denominations and groups can only register as non-governmental organisations and non-profit-making private-law-associations. Therefore, they are not able to enjoy the same conditions in respect of the exercise of their religious activities. The absence of a proper legal status has resulted in a number of problems, including in regard to property rights, and is unsatisfactory.²

¹ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010: Georgia*, November 17, Sec.I-II <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148936.htm> – Accessed 25 May 2011 – Attachment 1; 'Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Georgia' 2011, *Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly – Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee)*, 25 March, p. 26/para.137-139 <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=search&docid=4da6c0f72&skip=0&query=jehovah%20witnesses&querysi=Georgia&searchin=title&display=10&sort=date> – Accessed 26 May 2011 - Attachment 2.

² 'Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Georgia' 2011, *Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly – Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee)*, 25 March, p.26/ para.137 <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=search&docid=4da6c0f72&skip=0&query=jehovah%20witnesses>

139. Jehovah's Witnesses have been able to register as Jehovah's Witnesses since December 2008 (since 2003, they were registered as a branch of the Watch Tower Society) and do not face any legal problems in importing literature or carrying out their activities. However, prejudice still exists in society and acts of violence, including vandalism of their places of worship, still occur. These deplorable acts do not seem to be diligently investigated and prosecuted by police and the prosecution service. In addition, Jehovah's Witnesses report difficulties in renting space for their places of worship, especially in Tbilisi, as well as the fact that the construction of places of worship is hindered.³

The US Department of State (USDOS), in its International Religious Freedom Report 2010, states that Georgian law provides for freedom of religion and that the Government generally respects this in practice but notes 'continued reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice'.⁴ It also notes that while the Government agencies tasked with protecting human rights are active in defending religious freedom, religious minorities including Jehovah's Witnesses have expressed dissatisfaction with their investigative follow up in some cases.⁵

The USDOS report lists a number of alleged incidences of violence and vandalism against Jehovah's Witnesses in 2010 and 2009. For example, the report states:

On March 27, 2010, and on three occasions in 2009, members of Jehovah's Witnesses were harassed and in some cases physically assaulted by nonmembers in the community. In all the cases, the incidents were reported to authorities; investigations were pending at the end of the reporting period.

On March 7, 2010, two inebriated persons attacked a kingdom hall in Tbilisi, throwing stones into the building. A complaint was filed with the Main Prosecutor's Office and the PDO. Another complaint accused previous owners of the land where the hall was built of organizing a demonstration on April 9, 2010, to prohibit Jehovah's Witnesses from using it. Investigations were pending at the end of the reporting period.⁶

The USDOS report also noted that Jehovah's Witnesses experienced difficulty obtaining and preserving property rights for places of worship. It cited instances where the group were denied permission to rent, purchase or develop potential sites for places of worship.⁷

[s&quersys=Georgia&searchin=title&display=10&sort=date](#) – Accessed 26 May 2011 - Attachment 2.

³'Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Georgia' 2011, *Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly – Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee)*, 25 March, p.26/para.139 <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=search&docid=4da6c0f72&skip=0&query=jehovah%20witnesses&quersys=Georgia&searchin=title&display=10&sort=date> – Accessed 26 May 2011 - Attachment 2.

⁴ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010: Georgia*, November 17, Introduction <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148936.htm> – Accessed 25 May 2011 – Attachment 1.

⁵ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010: Georgia*, November 17, Sec.II <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148936.htm> – Accessed 25 May 2011 – Attachment 1

⁶ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010: Georgia*, November 17, Sec.III <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148936.htm> – Accessed 25 May 2011 – Attachment 1

⁷ US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010: Georgia*, November 17, Sec.II <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148936.htm> – Accessed 25 May 2011- Attachment 1.

The Freedom House report, *Freedom in the World 2010*, states the following regarding the harassment and intimidation of religious minorities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, in Georgia at the hands of law enforcement officials and extremists from the country's majority Georgian Orthodox Church:

'Freedom of religion is respected for the country's largely Georgian Orthodox Christian population and some traditional minority groups, including Muslims and Jews. However, members of newer groups, including Baptists, Pentecostals, and Jehovah's Witnesses, have faced harassment and intimidation by law enforcement officials and Georgian Orthodox extremists.'⁸

In June 2010, The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) noted that reports of harassment of minorities including Jehovah's Witnesses by the majority population continue to occur. The report states:

'ECRI notes with deep concern that cases of harassment and verbal and physical abuse against persons belonging to religious minorities have continued to be reported in recent years. There are also instances of interference with places of worship or private property belonging to members of religious minorities. The perpetrators of these acts are generally persons belonging to the local majority population. Such cases are said to occur throughout the country and they generally target non-traditional religious minorities and in particular Jehovah's Witnesses'⁹

No recent media reports could be found regarding violence or harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia. The Jehovah's Witnesses official media website for Georgia lists a number of media reports relating to religious discrimination in the country. However, they are mostly quite old, with the most recent article being from 2007.¹⁰

⁸ Freedom House 2010, *Freedom in the world 2010: Georgia*, 12 January <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2010&country=7827> – Accessed 25 May 2011 - Attachment 3.

⁹ 'ECRI Report on Georgia (fourth monitoring cycle)' 2010, *European Commission against Racism and Intolerance*, 15 June, p.20/para.46 <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=search&docid=4c18750d2&skip=0&query=jehovah%20witnesses&querysi=Georgia&searchin=title&display=10&sort=date> – Accessed 26 May 2011 - Attachment 4.

¹⁰ 'Georgia' (undated), Jehovah's Witnesses Official Media Website, <http://www.jw-media.org/geo/index.htm> – Accessed 26 May 2011 – Attachment 5.

Attachments

1. US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010: Georgia*, November 17 <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148936.htm> – Accessed 25 May 2011.
2. ‘Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Georgia’ 2011, *Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly – Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee)*, 25 March <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=search&docid=4da6c0f72&skip=0&query=jehovah%20witnesses&querysi=Georgia&searchin=title&display=10&sort=date> – Accessed 26 May 2011.
3. Freedom House 2010, *Freedom in the world 2010: Georgia*, 12 January <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2010&country=7827> – Accessed 25 May 2011.
4. ‘ECRI Report on Georgia (fourth monitoring cycle)’ 2010, *European Commission against Racism and Intolerance*, 15 June <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=search&docid=4c18750d2&skip=0&query=jehovah%20witnesses&querysi=Georgia&searchin=title&display=10&sort=date> – Accessed 26 May 2011.
5. ‘Georgia’ (undated), Jehovah’s Witnesses Official Media Website, <http://www.jw-media.org/geo/index.htm> – Accessed 26 May 2011.