



This article was published by F18News on: 23 April 2008

ABKHAZIA: Only Georgian Orthodox priest expelled

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

The internationally unrecognised entity of Abkhazia has expelled a Georgian Orthodox priest, Fr Pimen Kardava, after a "special decree" of the canonically unrecognised Abkhaz Orthodox Church. Independent sources who preferred not to be identified have told Forum 18 News Service that the expulsion was carried out by the entity's SSS security police. Fr Kardava's expulsion, just before the Orthodox celebration of Easter, leaves the entity's Georgian Orthodox believers without any priests. Yuri Ashuba, head of the SSS security police, declined to speak to Forum 18, but a subordinate stated that "You should speak to Fr Vissarion Aplia of the Abkhaz Orthodox Church." He admitted that Fr Aplia is not a state official but would not say why he was the appropriate person to answer questions. The Abkhaz diocesan administration's telephone was not answered. Also, Batal Kobakhia, chair of the entity's parliamentary Human Rights Committee, told Forum 18 that a Religion Law is being prepared.

Officials of the State Security Service (SSS) of the unrecognised republic of Abkhazia on the Black Sea coast have denied to Forum 18 News Service that it was involved in the 10 April expulsion of a Georgian Orthodox priest, Fr Pimen Kardava. The priest had been serving for no more than a few weeks in his native Gali District, where his mother still lives. His expulsion leaves the Georgian Orthodox population again without any priests. "You shouldn't address this question to us," Major Jansukh Muratiya, head of the SSS security police in Gali District, told Forum 18 on 23 April. "We weren't involved at all." He insisted the expulsion was a decision of the Abkhaz Orthodox diocese. However, independent sources who preferred not to be identified, told Forum 18 that Fr Kardava was expelled by the SSS.

A nun from the Georgian city of Zugdidi, close to the border with Gali District, reports that the Zugdidi Diocese is expecting many Gali residents to try to come across the border to attend Easter services over the coming days. (The Georgian Orthodox Church celebrates Easter on 27 April.) "Many will come across for Easter, it's always that way as they don't have their own priests there," she told Forum 18 on 23 April. "Those that are able to and can afford to do so will come to pray in church with us, but not everyone can afford it."

Forum 18 tried to reach Yuri Ashuba, the head of the SSS security police, at his office in the capital Sukhum (Sokhumi in Georgian) on 23 April to find out why his agency expelled Fr Kardava and why no priests of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate are allowed to serve local church members in Abkhazia. The duty officer relayed Forum 18's questions to Ashuba, but he declined to speak to Forum 18. "The chief won't comment," the duty officer told Forum 18. "You should speak to Fr Vissarion Aplia of the Abkhaz Orthodox Church." The duty officer admitted that Fr Aplia is not a state official but would not say why he was the appropriate person to answer Forum 18's questions. He then put the phone down.

The telephone number of the Abkhaz diocesan administration was not answered on 23 April.

The Abkhaz state news agency Apsnypress on 10 April quoted Fr Aplia as declaring that Fr Kardava's expulsion had been ordered by a "special decree" from the Abkhaz Diocese. Fr Aplia was reported as saying that although Fr Kardava is a resident of Gali District, that does not give him the right to act there as a priest. Fr Aplia also claimed that his Abkhaz Diocese has enough priests.

Abkhaz and Georgian forces fought a bitter war for control of Abkhazia in the early 1990s, a war the Abkhaz won. The Abkhaz government in Sukhum has not been recognised by the international community. Almost the entire ethnic Georgian population fled in the wake of the defeat. However, some 30,000 are estimated to have remained in or returned to the southern Gali District, which abuts Georgia proper, where they make up the vast majority of the population.

Since the war, ethnic Abkhaz Orthodox priests have formed the Diocese of Sukhum and Abkhazia, which has some 16 clergy but no bishop. The Diocese is not recognised by the Georgian, Russian or other Orthodox Patriarchates, though the Moscow Patriarchate has been prepared to ordain its priests. The Abkhaz Diocese insists that it is the only Orthodox jurisdiction with the right to function in Abkhazia, a position backed by the Abkhaz authorities.

"The activity of the Georgian Orthodox Church does not extend to Gali District or elsewhere in Abkhazia," an official of the Information Office of Abkhazia's President, Sergei Bagapsh, told Forum 18 from Sukhum on 23 April. "We have our own Church." The official conceded that individuals have the right to choose their own faith or none, but insisted that the Georgian Orthodox

Church cannot be one of those choices.

Asked about the expulsion of Fr Kardava, the official - who would not give his name - said that the priest had failed to fulfil procedures for "foreigners" to live and work in Abkhazia. When Forum 18 pointed out that according to press reports he had been born in Gali District, the official responded: "So what? He's a Georgian citizen and needs to fulfil the procedures, whether he's an engineer, doctor or priest. Besides, when priests conduct politics we kick them out." However, the official declined to give any evidence that Fr Kardava had "conducted politics".

Abkhazia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Maxim Gvinjia, also complained about Fr Kardava, though he insisted that the problem was "more political than religious". "Such a problem could happen to any other priest coming to preach in a country without notification and approval of the local Church and Archbishop," Gvinjia told Forum 18 from Sukhum on 23 April. "Imagine a Russian priest coming to Georgia by himself or sent to Georgia by the Russian Orthodox Church without notifying the Georgian Orthodox Church. I am sure he would immediately be expelled from Georgia."

Gvinjia described the decision of the Georgian Orthodox Church to send Fr Kardava to Abkhazia "without due administrative procedures" as "more than provocative". "If Georgia wants to send a priest to Abkhazia they first of all have to approach the Abkhaz Archbishop and proceed according to all necessary Church procedures."

The expulsion of Fr Kardava once again leaves Orthodox members of the local ethnic Georgian population without access to clergy. "Many Orthodox here want to be able to attend services and have churches to pray in," one local Orthodox Christian who preferred not to be identified told Forum 18. "No priest except for Fr Pimen has served here for fifteen years. But we can't do anything about this." The source noted that there are about five old Orthodox churches in Gali District that could be brought back into use with only minor repairs. "The rest are in ruins."

Defending the Abkhaz authorities' harsh line against the Georgian Orthodox Church is Batal Kobakhia, a deputy in the entity's parliament and chair of its Human Rights Committee. "It is because the conflict is unresolved that the entry of citizens of Georgia is strictly regulated," he told Forum 18 from Sukhum on 22 April. "It's also because the Georgian Church is so politicised that people in Abkhazia find it hard to accept the arrival of Georgian priests." He claimed that in the 1990s the Georgian Patriarch Ilya II had blessed the murder of Abkhazians by Georgian fighters.

The Georgian Orthodox Church has long complained of the impossibility of serving the Georgian Orthodox population of Abkhazia. Back in 2004, when he was a member of a civil society organisation, Kobakhia defended this to Forum 18. He also defended the 1995 Presidential Decree banning the Jehovah's Witnesses in Abkhazia (see F18News 27 April 2004 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=308>).

Kobakhia continues to insist that the unresolved conflict justifies the ban on the Jehovah's Witnesses. "As long as Georgia refuses to sign a non-aggression treaty, the Jehovah's Witnesses' refusal to serve in the army and propaganda on this is considered a threat to national security."

Abkhazia's Deputy Foreign Minister agrees, but points out that "Jehovah's Witnesses are practicing in Abkhazia though the Presidential Decree was not cancelled yet". Gvinjia insisted though that the Abkhaz government is right to be worried as, he claimed, some twenty percent of the population had become adherents of this "alien belief" after the war "not because of their belief but because of material benefits". "It was really alarming at that time. I am sure that if any sect represented such a great influence in any other country it would immediately be closed."

Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18 that they would like the Presidential Decree to be lifted, but said they can now practice their faith fairly freely in Abkhazia.

Kobakhia also told Forum 18 that he is now preparing a Religion Law. Abkhazia has not so far had a specific Religion Law. (END)

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806>.

A printer-friendly map of Georgia, including Abkhazia (whose extent in the north-west is not marked), can be found at <<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=georgi>>.

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