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GEORGIA: Will police protect Muslim prayers from mobs?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service

Since late May, mobs of non-Muslims have obstructed Muslims in the eastern Georgian village of Samtatskaro from praying freely, human rights defenders have told Forum 18 News Service. The mob threatened to burn down the imam's home and drive him from the village. Guliko Nadirashvili, head of the village, "mentioned publicly that if the majority decides that there must not be a mosque in the village, that this is Christian land and the whole village is against Muslims' prayer, we won't allow them to pray," a human rights defender told Forum 18. Nadirashvili claimed to Forum 18 that Muslims have "no problems praying". The local police chief refused to discuss the violence and threats with Forum 18 and the Interior Ministry in the capital Tbilisi was unable to say if anyone has been prosecuted over this and two similar mob attacks on Muslims in late 2012.

Police and local authorities in the eastern Georgian village of Samtatskaro have failed to defend the rights of local Muslims to meet for prayer together in the face of mob violence and threats, human rights defenders and local Muslims have complained to Forum 18 News Service. However, the head of the village dismissed any complaints. "Christians and Muslims have the right to pray here," Guliko Nadirashvili, head of the village, claimed to Forum 18 on 2 July. "The imam has no problems here."

The local police chief refused to discuss the violence and threats with Forum 18 and the Interior Ministry in the capital Tbilisi was unable to say if anyone has been prosecuted over this and two similar mob attacks on Muslims in late 2012.

One human rights defender, who visited Samtatskaro in mid-June after the problems for the Muslims began, dismissed Nadirashvili's remarks as "ridiculous". "Together with other protesters, she has given many interviews and mentioned publicly that if the majority decides that there must not be a mosque in the village, that this is Christian land and the whole village is against Muslims' prayer, we won't allow them to pray," the human rights defender pointed out to Forum 18. "She was leading the population against the Muslims, blocking the entrance to the village and to the prayer house."

One of the imam's sons, Ednar Khozrevanidze, told Kavkazsky Uzel news website on 1 July that about 40 Muslims used to meet regularly for Friday prayers in the village, but most had stopped coming in the last few months out of fear.

"State has a positive obligation"

Georgia's Public Defender (Ombudperson) Ucha Nanuashvili has repeatedly condemned the violence and threats of violence against Samtatskaro's Muslim community, and called for police to protect the community adequately. "The state has a positive obligation to ensure the effective realization of freedom of religion," he pointed out in a 7 June statement. "The above obligation is especially important for religious minorities."

Nanuashvili went further in a 3 July statement, calling for disciplinary action to be considered against village head Nadirashvili and criminal prosecution of those who attacked or made threats against the Muslim community.

The problems for Samtatskaro's Muslim community - which began in May - follow several similar instances of mob attacks on Muslim prayers in the past year (see below).

Any prosecutions?

Human rights defenders told Forum 18 that no one has been prosecuted over the attacks on Muslims in the three villages since October 2012.

However, a spokesperson for the Interior Ministry (which oversees the police) in Tbilisi insisted to Forum 18 on 3 July that "our Ministry is doing much about this issue". She was unable to say what the Ministry was doing and asked for Forum 18 to send its questions in writing.

Forum 18 wrote on the morning of 3 July to ask how many people had been brought to court and punished after the three sets of incidents. Forum 18 asked for the dates of any convictions, the name of the court, the article of the administrative or criminal code

they were prosecuted under and the penalties the courts handed down. Forum 18 also asked what measures the police had taken in the three villages to protect the rights of local Muslims to gather for worship without fear of attack.

Despite repeated promises from Interior Ministry spokespersons during 3 and 4 July, at the end of the working day in Tbilisi on 4 July a spokesperson told Forum 18 that "in one day it is not easy to provide all the information you need". The spokesperson promised to provide the information in the following days.

Past violence

Georgia was plagued by physical attacks on non-Georgian Orthodox communities between 1996 and 2003. Mobs inflicted physical injuries on followers of a variety of faiths suffered, destroyed places of worship and stole and burnt religious literature. Most of the victims were Jehovah's Witnesses, but Baptists, Catholics, Pentecostals and True Orthodox Christians were also attacked. The violence subsided with the ousting of then President Eduard Shevardnadze, but few of the perpetrators were ever brought to justice (see F18News 10 November 2006 <http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=867>).

More recently, Georgian Orthodox clergy and laypeople have used violence against other groups they dislike, including at a 17 May gay rights street demonstration in Tbilisi.

Non-Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate communities still face extra-legal restrictions and pressure from Patriarchate representatives and Georgian Orthodox laypeople.

Although the Armenian Apostolic Church has not faced recent attacks, some of its historical churches confiscated during the Soviet period - including Norashen and Surb Nshan in Tbilisi - "have not been returned to their historical legitimate owner, which is the Armenian Diocese in Georgia", Levon Isakhanyan, adviser to the bishop and head of the diocesan legal department, told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 4 July.

Catholics too have failed to regain churches confiscated in the Soviet period and handed to the Georgian Orthodox in the 1990s.

Isakhanyan added that only the Georgian Orthodox Church receives state funding which, he points out, comes from taxpayers of a wide variety of faiths and none.

Villagers protest against Muslims exercising religious freedom

Samtatskaro is a village of Dedoplistskaro Municipality in eastern Georgia, on the border with Azerbaijan. Unlike other Muslims in eastern Georgia, who are mainly ethnic Azeris, Samtatskaro's Muslims are ethnic Georgians who migrated from Adjara in western Georgia in the late 1970s.

Georgia's Muslim Administration bought the community a house to use for worship in early 2013. The appearance of the house was not changed to make it look more like a mosque. However, the villagers still protested against the Muslim community buying the house, Public Defender Nanuashvili complained in a 7 June statement. "The Orthodox population of the village protest [against] the exercise of freedom of religion by Muslims."

Mob violence

Only 13 of Samtatskaro's Muslims - Imam Suliko Khozrevanidze's family and a few guests - held Friday prayers on 28 June. Later that day about 200 local residents who are not Muslims gathered in protest outside the imam's home.

The crowd called on Imam Khozrevanidze to come out and threatened him. The mob threatened to burn down the imam's home and drive him from the village. His wife Emine Surmanidze was injured on the leg, though she is not sure whether she was kicked deliberately or not. "It was turmoil," she told Kavkazsky Uzel.

While the mob was protesting outside Khozrevanidze's home, Public Defender Nanuashvili warned that "the village is rather tense and there is a threat of physical violence". He publicly called on the Interior Minister Irakli Gharibashvili "to take immediate, effective measures" to defend Samtatskaro's Muslims. He called for police to be mobilised to defend the community.

"No problems praying"?

Nadirashvili, the head of Samtatskaro village administration, insisted to Forum 18 that Muslims in the village have "no problems praying" and that no one has interfered in their prayers. Asked if the village's Muslims are afraid following repeated attacks since 24 May, Nadirashvili responded: "I don't know if they're afraid." She then put the phone down.

Forum 18 tried to find out what action the police had taken to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief of Samtatskaro's Muslim community, and whether any of those who attacked and threatened the community are to face prosecution. However,

reached on 2 July, Georgi Bubunashvili, head of Dedoplistskaro Municipality Police, refused absolutely to discuss anything. He referred Forum 18 to the Interior Ministry press office in Tbilisi.

Latest violence follows earlier violence

Trouble began for Samtatskaro's Muslim community on Friday 24 May, Tariel Nakaidze of the Georgian Union of Muslims told Forum 18 from Batumi on 2 July. Nadirashvili, the head of the village, and other non-Muslim villagers went to the mosque and prevented the Muslims from holding Friday prayers. "Prayer rugs and holy books were thrown out of their mosque", complained the Council of Religions attached to the Public Defender's Office - a body uniting Protestant, Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, Jewish, Yezidi and Muslim representatives.

Meetings for worship were similarly prevented on Friday 31 May and Friday 7 June. On 31 May, mobs did not allow the regional Muslim leader Jemal Adadze and those accompanying him into Samtatskaro, threatening them with "bad things" if they did. On 7 June, Imam Khozrevanidze was questioned by police.

"We trust the local administration"

Non-Muslim villagers did allow Muslim Friday prayers to take place on 14 June, which were also attended by Georgia's Reintegration Minister Paata Zakareishvili. He claimed in a statement on the Ministry website that the local administration and the Muslims had agreed that no further problems would arise. "We trust the local administration," the statement quoted him as declaring.

State fails to protect victims and prosecute offenders

Tbilisi-based Georgian Democracy Initiative condemned the 28 June mob attack in a statement the following day. "We believe that the actions of the persons who took part in yesterday's incident contained the signs of a number of crimes punishable by the Georgian legislation, including threat (Article 151 of the Criminal Code) and hooliganism (Article 239 of the Criminal Code), which were motivated by religious affiliation."

"The failure of the state to take adequate measures against the offenders who were involved in the previous conflict situations has further encouraged the part of the population that are aggressive towards the local Muslims," Georgian Democracy Initiative warned. "Such actions by the population have been encouraged by the statements of the officials of the local self-government body who justified the violation of the minority rights by the will of the majority and democracy as a form of the majority rule."

Death threats by military police

Muslims have also faced other threats of violence from state officials. On 14 April, three drunk military police officers verbally assaulted inhabitants of the village of Tsikhisdziri, Kobuleti, and fired several shots. They stopped cars, searched individuals, calling them "Tatars", and demanded that they show the Georgian Orthodox cross round their necks.

The Defence Ministry sacked the officers, while the Head of Senaki Military Police Division was also dismissed, press reports said.

On 18 April, the Prosecutor's Office said two individuals had been arrested. According to the Prosecutor's Office a third individual did not appear before investigative bodies. The investigation was launched under Criminal Code Articles 239, Parts 2a and 3 and Article 333, Parts 3b and 3c.

Public Defender Nanuashvili condemned the attacks on 19 April, describing the military police officers' behaviour as "unacceptable". He welcomed the "timely response of law enforcement bodies". He pointed out that under Criminal Code Article 53, responsibility should be increased if religious intolerance is perceived as the basis of committing the crime. Article 156 (persecution on the basis of one's confession, faith or belief) should also be applied, he added

"The objective and adequate investigation of this case is essential for preventing religious intolerance," Nanuashvili declared.

Mob attacks during 2012 in other villages

The threats to Samtatskaro's Muslim community followed similar threats during 2012 in other villages. On 26 October and 2 November 2012, non-Muslim residents of the village of Nigvziani in Lanchkhuti Municipality, near Samtredia in western Georgia, demanded that Muslims stop gathering for prayers in a private house owned by Archil Kakhadze.

Local Muslims, who moved to Nigvziani from Adjara in 1989, had earlier travelled to a mosque in Batumi, but began praying in their village in 2011.

The mob warned the Muslims that if they did not stop they would be killed and their mosque would be burnt down. Muslim children were also threatened, human rights defenders told Forum 18. They added that Georgian Orthodox priests incited the population

against the Muslims.

On 2 November 2012, non-Muslim villagers blocked the road to prevent Georgia's Chief Mufti Jemal Paksadze from joining Nigvziani's Muslims for Friday prayers. Neither police forces nor law enforcement bodies intervened to prevent public disorder and numerous criminal actions, human rights defenders complained to Forum 18. Nor did they protect the right of Muslims to freedom of movement. Police or other security forces did not detain a single offender participating in these events, despite the questioning of about ten villagers at the urging of representatives of Public Defender Nanuashvili.

"We gave them [local Muslims] one week to decide what to do," Georgian Orthodox deacon Saba Jgenti told Kavkazsky Uzel on 3 November 2012. "We told them that local people will not allow minarets and mass prayers in this village."

The situation later calmed down after representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate and the mufti met in the Patriarchate in Tbilisi. No obstruction or threats occurred as the community gathered again for Friday prayers on 9 November 2012. However, local non-Muslims remain aggressive towards the Muslims and insist they will not allow Muslims from outside the village to join their fellow-Muslims for prayers, human rights defenders complain. They also continue to oppose the building of a new mosque in the village.

"State officials made very vague statements about these events, stating that the interests of both sides must be taken into account and protected," one human rights defender lamented to Forum 18. "Officials said that in the first place the two religious groups (Muslims and Orthodox Church) should come to terms and only after that in case of need the law enforcement agencies might intervene. Such a response by state and law enforcement officials was inadequate."

On 29 November 2012, similar threats against a local imam occurred in another village, Tsintsarko in Tetrtsarko Municipality south-west of Tbilisi. Part of the local Orthodox population protested against the exercise of religious freedom by the Muslim population. They confronted the imam, Marad Gorjomelidze, assaulted him verbally and threatened that unless he stopped the prayer, they would burn down his house and expel him from the village. "Unfortunately the State's response was again inappropriate," human rights defenders lamented to Forum 18.

However, police did prevent a mob from interrupting Muslim prayers in Tsintsarko on 30 November 2012. (END)

Previous reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Georgia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=24>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Georgia is available at <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Georgia>.

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