



This article was published by F18News on: 16 June 2003

GEORGIA: "We'll be back," mob warns Pentecostals

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

Demonstrators reportedly organised by Orthodox priest Fr David blockaded a Pentecostal church in the capital Tbilisi for seven hours on 15 June, preventing believers from attending a special Pentecost service. "We will do everything to prevent you from meeting. We won't stop till there's blood," Vera Kalutskaya, wife of the pastor, quoted members of the mob as telling the Pentecostals. She told Forum 18 News Service they had threatened to kill her husband, Pastor Nikolai Kalutsky. "You have incorrect information. They were not Orthodox, they were just local residents," local police chief Timur Anjaparidze told Forum 18.

Young men who blockaded a Pentecostal church in the capital Tbilisi for seven hours on 15 June to prevent believers from gathering for worship have promised the Pentecostals they will be back next Sunday, church members have told Forum 18 News Service. "We will do everything to prevent you from meeting. We won't stop till there's blood," Vera Kalutskaya, wife of the pastor, quoted members of the mob as telling the Pentecostals. "The police just stood and watched - they didn't defend us." The blockade of the church by self-appointed Orthodox vigilantes came the same day that a Baptist church was set on fire in the village of Akhalsopeli in Kvareli district of eastern Georgia (see separate F18News article) and two weeks after police and local authorities halted Jehovah's Witness conventions in central and southern Georgia.

Kalutskaya told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 16 June that their Russian-language church had organised a special service and meal to celebrate the feast of Pentecost. She said that although there was no actual violence, the mob shouted and threatened to beat and even kill her husband, Pastor Nikolai Kalutsky. "But he's not afraid," she added.

She reported that the demonstrators were brought in about a dozen vehicles at about 9 am and they did not leave until 4 pm. She said one of the young men admitted that the protest had been organised by an Orthodox priest, Fr David. She believes he was one of the two Orthodox priests who visited their home a year ago to tell them they were Satanists and that they were not to meet any more. "At that time the mob was shouting 'Georgia without Satanists!', exactly the same as they were shouting yesterday."

Contacted about why the police had not prevented the Orthodox mob from blockading the Pentecostal service, the police chief for the Tbilisi district of Gldani-Nadzaladevi declared: "You have incorrect information. They were not Orthodox, they were just local residents." Timur Anjaparidze claimed that the neighbours had every right to protest against the Pentecostals. "They meet in a private home in a narrow street," he told Forum 18 on 15 June. "They shouldn't meet there. Their services disturb the neighbourhood as several hundred people attend and make lots of noise."

Kalutskaya denies that the protestors were neighbours and insists that the mob was organised and made up mainly of young men between the ages of about 15 and 30. She vigorously rejected claims that the church was noisy or disturbed neighbours. "The hall where the church meets in our yard is half below ground. You cannot hear anything in our yard, let alone on the street." She said that when the police came to the house in the evening after the protestors had dispersed they had repeated these claims. She insists the church members are "quiet and orderly".

Georgia has been plagued by violence against religious minorities from self-appointed Orthodox vigilantes in the past few years, who appear to enjoy powerful support from the authorities. No-one has been convicted and imprisoned for any of the more than one hundred violent attacks. One of the most notorious organisers of the attacks, Old Calendarist priest Father Basil Mkalavishvili, is also based in Tbilisi's Gldani district. On 4 June a court ordered that he be taken into preventive custody for three months while the long-running trial against him for attacking Jehovah's Witness meetings continues (see F18News 5 June 2003), a decision upheld by a higher court on 10 June. However, Mkalavishvili has gone into hiding to evade arrest.

"We are now looking for Mkalavishvili," Anjaparidze told Forum 18, denying rumours that he has taken refuge with his supporters in his church in Gldani. "Of course we have looked for him inside the church. He's not there," Anjaparidze declared categorically. "As soon as we find him we will arrest him." He denied suggestions Mkalavishvili had support from the police or that they were afraid of arresting him. "I'm not afraid of anyone. I fulfil the law. The police had no sanction to arrest him before - we have only had this sanction for ten days."

Elsewhere in Georgia, the authorities are continuing to crack down on religious minorities. On 1 June, uniformed police with

handguns entered private property in the central town of Gori where about 600 Jehovah's Witnesses were attending a convention. "Amateur video shows the chief of the criminal section of Gori police, Levan Chokheli, taking the stage and ordering the meeting to stop," the Jehovah's Witnesses reported on 2 June. "Those in attendance departed after police ordered them to leave."

One day earlier, on 31 May, police in plain clothes stopped large buses, minibuses and personal vehicles from entering private property in the Aspindza region of southern Georgia where the Jehovah's Witnesses were preparing another convention for about 700 people. "In that instance, the governor of the Aspindza region, Anzor Sandroshvili, took the stage of the convention and ordered those assembled to leave the site. Eyewitnesses believed that Governor Sandroshvili threatened further action if those in attendance did not depart."

On 3 May, Gori region governor, Zaza Koshadze, and Gori region police chief, Rezo Kotiashvili, as well as other officials, ordered the cancellation of a Jehovah's Witness meeting planned on the same Gori site. On 4 May, camouflage-uniformed police armed with machine guns entered the site.

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