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ABKHAZIA: JW's still banned and Georgian Orthodox still barred

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

Politicians in the breakaway unrecognised republic of Abkhazia have told Forum 18 News Service that the Jehovah's Witnesses will continue to be banned. "If they won't defend their families, why should they have the freedom to practice their faith?" asked Valera Zantaria, making it clear that the ban was because of the Jehovah's Witnesses refusal of military service. Also unable to function is the Georgian Orthodox Church, whose members have to travel out of Abkhazia to the Georgian city of Zugdidi for services. Although the Catholic church can function in Abkhazia, access for priests has become difficult because Russian border guards refuse to let them through. Lutherans and unregistered Baptists are also allowed to function, one unregistered Baptist Pastor telling Forum 18 that conditions for their people are better in Abkhazia than in Georgia, with preaching permitted "once the authorities had established they were not Jehovah's Witnesses."

Several of Abkhazia's leading politicians have indicated there will be no repeal of the ban on the activity of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the breakaway Black Sea republic in north-west Georgia. "If they won't defend their families, why should they have the freedom to practice their faith?" asked Valera Zantaria, a member of the Abkhaz parliament, referring to the Jehovah's Witness practice of refusing to perform all military service. "The ban is connected with their refusal to defend their country." Also speaking to Forum 18 News Service, Nugzar Ashuba, speaker of Abkhazia's parliament, echoed these sentiments, insisting that the ban cannot therefore be lifted.

Also unable to function in the republic - which won a bitter war with Georgia in 1993 and has since declared independence, though it remains unrecognised by any country - is the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate, while access from Russia for a Catholic priest has become difficult because of controls imposed by Russia on the border.

The Jehovah's Witnesses were banned in Abkhazia on 10 October 1995. A decree signed by President Vladislav Ardzinba said the ban was imposed "in connection with the unlawful activities of the Jehovah's Witnesses' sect, which is conducting propaganda aimed at undermining state security, inflaming religious discord, deformation of the personality and which is having a negative effect of the upbringing of the younger generation". The decree instructed the chief prosecutor and the head of the state security service to implement the ban.

"The Jehovah's Witnesses propagandise and preach not to serve in the army," Ashuba told Forum 18 on 23 April. "We are in a state of war with Georgia and every citizen of Abkhazia who can take up arms must be prepared to do so. Unfortunately we can't afford to have any alternative to military service."

Even civil society representatives share these views. "Society is strongly against allowing alternative service," Batal Kobakhia of the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes in the Abkhaz capital Sukhum (Sukhumi in Georgian) [Sokhumi] told Forum 18 on 23 April. He also complained of the way the Jehovah's Witnesses function and argued that the authorities were right to take measures against them. "Their aggressive propaganda must be regulated - there should be some kind of controls."

Kobakhia said there had been some discussion of lifting the ban, but no moves to do so. He added that Jehovah's Witness representatives "often appeal to us", but indicated that his organisation would do nothing to help them achieve the lifting of the ban.

Of the population of 250,000 that remains in Abkhazia in the wake of the war a decade ago when almost all the ethnic Georgian population was driven out, a Jehovah's Witness official estimates that there are several thousand adherents. "The situation for our people there is relatively calm and there are no recent reports of harassment or persecution," the official, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 from the Jehovah's Witness centre in the Russian city of St Petersburg on 27 April. "But the ban clearly remains in force even if it is not being actively implemented."

He said Jehovah's Witnesses in Abkhazia can meet and preach "relatively freely", though sometimes they are stopped and warned. He said up to several dozen members could generally meet without obstruction, but it was impossible to hold larger conventions. "We have not tried to hold large-scale events recently, but there's no point," the official told Forum 18. "We would not get permission."

Jehovah's Witness literature remains banned and is routinely confiscated when discovered. "Officials don't normally go looking for it, but when they find it they take it," the St Petersburg official told Forum 18. "They don't normally raid private homes, but might find it when searching vehicles, or people's bags on the street."

He said there is no possibility to produce books or magazines inside Abkhazia or to import them officially from Russia, but that small-scale private importing of literature is possible. But he added that literature is often confiscated by Abkhaz border guards at the land border with Russia when Jehovah's Witnesses return from conventions or from visiting relatives and fellow believers. He said that there are no restrictions on Jehovah's Witnesses crossing over into Russia to attend conventions, which are often held close to Abkhazia in and around the Russian Black Sea port of Sochi.

But the official was blunt that the Jehovah's Witnesses want the ban lifted. He said one of their leaders, Vasili Kalin, went from Russia to talk to Abkhaz officials in 2002. "The officials got a better understanding of Jehovah's Witnesses and we managed to resolve most of the problems about our prisoners," the official told Forum 18. "They promised to consider lifting the ban, but this did not happen."

The second half of the 1990s saw a series of raids on Jehovah's Witness meetings and warnings that they should not meet. Several young men were imprisoned for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. But the last of the prisoners, Elgudzha Tsulaya, sentenced to four years' imprisonment in 2000, was freed early on 10 April 2003, and no Jehovah's Witnesses are currently imprisoned for refusing military service. "Our young men explain why they are not prepared to do military service and they are then left alone."

Foreign diplomats visiting Abkhazia have told Forum 18 that Abkhaz Foreign Ministry officials have told them that as well as the Jehovah's Witnesses other "new religious groups", such as Mormons, would also not be allowed to function there. But officials said that "traditional" faiths, such as Orthodox, Armenian and Catholic Christians, Muslims and Jews, could function without problem.

Local Armenians report that there are no regularly functioning Armenian Apostolic Churches, although there are some 100,000 ethnic Armenians who may indeed make up the largest single ethnic community, even more than ethnic Abkhaz. A visiting foreign scholar told Forum 18 that the local Armenian community has a small chapel in a private room in the town of Gagra, though it is only used when priests visit from the Russian region of Krasnodar.

The Polish brothers Dariusz and Jacek Jagodinski, both Catholic priests based in Sochi, used to travel regularly to Sukhum to say mass in the Catholic church and to Gagra, where Mass was held in private flats, but that this has become difficult because the Russian border guards refuse to let them through. "The Abkhaz government is a good government for us," Fr Dariusz Jagodinski told Forum 18 on 27 April. "They say we can go across at any time." He said he hoped the Russian government would soon issue them documents allowing them once again to cross the border.

Likewise the Lutheran community has no complaint against the Abkhaz authorities. They allowed the previous bishop, Gert Hummel, to travel from his base in the Georgian capital Tbilisi to hold services in Sukhum's historic Lutheran church, which the authorities returned to religious use in 2002. In the wake of Bishop Hummel's death in March it remains unclear if this permission will continue.

Unregistered Baptists in Georgia told Forum 18 in Tbilisi last November that conditions for their churches are better in Abkhazia. "Our people are freer there than here," one pastor told Forum 18. "They were allowed to preach openly in Ochamchire in summer 2003 - once the authorities had established they were not Jehovah's Witnesses."

However, in the wake of the bitter hostility and mutual suspicion between the Georgians and the Abkhaz, the Georgian Orthodox Church remains unable to operate in Abkhazia, even in the southern Gali region where most of the population consists of Georgian returnees. "Of course we want to work there, but our bishops and priests are not allowed in," Bishop Gerasim Sharashenidze told Forum 18 on 27 April from Zugdidi, a Georgian city just south of Abkhazia's Gali region. "Our churches there are empty with no priests."

He said Georgian Orthodox still living in Abkhazia have to travel across to take part in religious services. "Very many Georgians come across to visit our cathedral and our churches for services and sacraments, especially baptism and marriage," he told Forum 18.

Bishop Gerasim told Forum 18 that for several years the exiled Georgian Orthodox Metropolitan of Sukhumi and Abkhazia, Daniel Datuashvili, has been talking to the Abkhaz authorities about the possibility of travelling to Abkhazia with several priests. "But always we get refusals from the Abkhaz side."

However, he said the Abkhaz authorities do not prevent Georgian Orthodox believers in Gali region from having Orthodox literature in Georgian.

The Orthodox churches that do function in Abkhazia are staffed by ethnic Abkhaz priests and priests from Russia, much to the distress of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate, which insists that only priests under its jurisdiction should be working there.

A printer-friendly map of Georgia, including Abkhazia, can be found at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=georgi>

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