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Georgia

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, local authorities sometimes restricted the rights of members of nontraditional religious minority groups.

During the period covered by this report, the status of religious freedom improved. Attacks on religious minorities, including violence, verbal harassment, and disruption of services and meetings, decreased. The Government arrested and sentenced to imprisonment the excommunicated Orthodox priest, Father Basil Mkalavishvili, but did not initiate criminal trials against several other instigators of religiously motivated violence. In April, the Government passed a law enabling religious groups to register. The Government also passed a law on general education that partly improved regulation of religious freedom in schools. Local harassment, both verbal and physical, of nontraditional minority religious groups continued. Although police were generally more responsive to the needs of minority religious groups, they failed at times to adequately protect these groups.

Citizens generally do not interfere with traditional (Orthodox, Muslim, or Jewish) religious groups; however, there is widespread suspicion of nontraditional ones. Government officials contributed to this negative attitude by sometimes making derogatory statements about certain religious minorities, especially Jehovah's Witnesses. Repeated, reputable public opinion polls indicated that a majority of citizens believe that nontraditional minority religious groups are detrimental to the state and that the prohibition of some of these groups is desirable.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Ambassador and other Embassy officials repeatedly raised U.S. Government concerns about the status of nontraditional religious groups and the harassment of nontraditional religious minorities with President Mikheil Saakashvili, senior government officials, and Members of Parliament (M.P.s). They also encouraged these officials to amend legislation to improve religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 25,900 square miles and its population is approximately 4.4 million. Most ethnic Georgians (more than 80 percent of the population, according to the 2002 census) nominally associate themselves with the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). According to common Orthodox practice, Orthodox churches serving other non-Georgian ethnic groups, such as Russians, Armenians, and Greeks, are under the territorial jurisdiction of the GOC. Non-Georgian Orthodox churches generally use the language of their communicants. In addition, there are a small number of mostly ethnic Russian adherents from three dissident Orthodox schools: The Molokani, Staroveriy (Old Believers), and Dukhoboriy (Spirit Wrestlers), few of who remain in the country. Under Soviet rule, the number of active churches and priests declined sharply and religious education was nearly nonexistent. Membership in the GOC has continued to increase since independence in 1991. The Church maintains 4 theological seminaries, 2 academies, several schools, and 27 church dioceses; it has approximately 700 priests, 250 monks, and 150 nuns. The Church is headed by Catholicos Patriarch, Ilia II; the Patriarchate is located in Tbilisi.

Several religions, including the Armenian Apostolic Church, Roman Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam, traditionally have coexisted with Georgian Orthodoxy. Some religions are related to ethnicity. Azeris comprise the second largest ethnic group (approximately 285,000, 7 percent of the population), and are largely Muslim; most live in the southeastern region of Kvemo-Kartli, where they constitute a majority. Armenians are the third largest ethnic group (approximately 249,000, 6 percent of the population), comprising the majority of the population in the southern Javakheti region. Armenians largely belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Approximately 9.9 percent of the population is nominally Muslim. There are three main Muslim populations: Ethnic Azeris, ethnic Georgian Muslims of Ajara, and ethnic Chechen Kists in northeastern Georgia. There are four large madrassahs (Muslim religious schools) attached to mosques in eastern Georgia, two of which are Shi'ite and financed by Iranian religious groups, and two of which are Sunni and financed by Turkish religious groups. There are also several smaller madrassahs in Ajara that are financed by Turkey.

The Armenian Apostolic Church is the third largest religious group. Approximately 3.9 percent of the population belongs to the Armenian Apostolic Church. All other religious groups constitute less than one percent of the population each.

Judaism, which has been present since ancient times, is practiced in a number of communities throughout the country, particularly in the largest cities, Tbilisi and Kutaisi. Approximately 4,000 Jews remain in the country following two large waves of emigration: the first in the early 1970s and the second during perestroika in the late 1980s. Before then, officials estimate there were approximately 40,000 Jews. The ethnic Greek Orthodox Christian community also used to be very large, with a population over 100,000, but emigration waves since independence have reduced this population to approximately 15,000. A small number of Kurdish Yezidis (approximately 18,000) have also lived in the country for centuries. There are small numbers of Lutheran worshipers (fewer than 1,000), mostly among descendants of German communities that first settled in the country several hundred years ago. There are also approximately 35,000 Roman Catholics, largely ethnic Georgians or Assyrians.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Protestant denominations have become more active and prominent. They include Baptists (composed of Russian, Georgian, Armenian, Ossetian, and Kurdish groups totaling approximately 8,000 adherents); Seventh-day Adventists (local representatives state that there are approximately 350 members); Pentecostals (both Georgian and Russian, estimated at approximately 9,000 adherents); Jehovah's Witnesses (local representatives state that the group has been in the country since 1953 and has approximately 16,000 adherents); and the New Apostolic Church. The number of Mormons in the country is small. There also are a few Baha'is, Hare Krishnas, and Buddhists. The membership of all these groups combined is officially estimated at 34,000 persons.

Section II. Status of Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, local officials, police, and other security officials at times harassed nontraditional religious minority groups and their foreign missionaries. The Constitution recognizes the special role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the country's history but also stipulates the independence of the Church from the State. A Constitutional Agreement between the Government and the Georgian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (the Concordat) was signed and ratified by Parliament in 2002. The Concordat recognizes the special role of the GOC and devolves authority over all religious matters to it, including matters outside the Church. The G O C enjoys tax-free status and is often consulted in matters of Government policy.

The President, Minister of the Interior, and Government Ombudsman have been effective advocates for religious freedom and have made numerous public speeches and appearances in support of minority religious groups. The Minister of the Interior, police and Procuracy have become more active in the protection of religious freedom but sometimes have failed to pursue criminal cases against Orthodox extremists for their previous attacks against religious minorities. The Human Rights unit in the Legal Department of the Procuracy is charged with protecting human rights, including religious freedom.

During the Soviet era, the GOC largely was suppressed and subordinated to political entities and the Committee for State Security (KGB), as were many other religious institutions; many churches were destroyed or turned into museums, concert halls, and other secular establishments. In the late 1980s, policies initiated by the Soviet government allowed the present Patriarch to begin reconsecrating churches formerly closed throughout the country. The Church remains very active in the restoration of these religious facilities and lobbies the Government for the return of properties that were held by the Church before the country's incorporation into the Soviet Union. (Church authorities have claimed that 20 to 30 percent of the country's land area at one time belonged to the Church.)

Georgia celebrates all Orthodox holy days. On March 21, President Saakashvili announced that the Muslim New Year would become a voluntary holiday for local citizens of the Muslim faith.

In April, Parliament passed an amendment to the Civil Code allowing for the registration of religious groups. Before the law was passed, religious groups were required to register as public (i.e. state-regulated) entities, but the law provided no mechanism to do this. Nevertheless, the Administrative Violations Code stipulated a fine for any unregistered religious groups. Furthermore, because unregistered organizations were not recognized as legal entities, they could not rent office space, import literature, or construct

buildings of worship, among other activities. Individual members of unregistered organizations could engage in these activities as individuals, but were exposed to personal legal liability. The new amendment allows for religions to register as private, non-commercial entities. Additionally, Parliament removed the article from the Administrative Violations Code fining unregistered religions. Religious groups that perform humanitarian services may also register as charitable organizations, although religious and other organizations may likewise perform humanitarian services and religious rituals without registration.

During the period covered by the report, the Government offered a religious course on Orthodox Theology in public schools. The GOC had exclusive influence over the material taught in these courses. While the course was elective, students reported receiving pressure to take it, and almost all students did. A law on education passed in April stipulates that teachers may no longer participate in prayers, proselytize, or preach any religion on school territory, thus in theory, excluding this course. However, the Ministry of Education has announced that schools will continue to offer this course until textbooks for a new course on the history of world religions can be prepared to replace it. The Ministry of Education estimates this will take at least 3 years.

In fall 2004, an official in the Ministry of Sport, Culture and Heritage solicited the opinion of the Patriarch about the legitimacy of Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the appropriateness of CRS's Building for the Future program which had just been launched. At about the same time, some politicians openly criticized CRS and questioned whether its programs were intended to "catholicize" youth. In response, the Patriarch held a cordial meeting with CRS representatives in June 2005 during which he praised CRS programs and suggested regular meetings between GOC and CRS to allay community fears.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The GOC enjoys a tax-exempt status not available to other religious groups, and lobbied Parliament and the Government for laws that would grant it special status and restrict the activities of missionaries from nontraditional religions. The 2002 Concordat between the Church and State defines relations between the two. The Concordat contained several controversial articles, giving the Patriarch of the Church immunity, granting the Church exclusive access to the military chaplaincy, exempting clergymen from military service, and giving the Church a unique consultative role in government, especially in the sphere of education. Article 6.6 can be--and under the Shevardnadze regime was--interpreted to give the GOC approval authority over all religious literature, symbols, construction and importation, whether Georgian Orthodox or not. The Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, and Armenian Apostolic churches, as well as representatives of the Jewish and Muslim faiths, signed formal documents with the Orthodox Patriarchate agreeing to the Concordat, but stated after the document was published that several of these controversial articles were not in the original. Representatives of nontraditional minority religious groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals, were not included in the Concordat process. The Roman Catholic and Armenian Churches have raised concerns about the authority the Orthodox Church enjoys over decisions regarding the return of its historical church property.

While most citizens practice their religion without restriction, the worship of some, particularly members of nontraditional faiths, has been restricted by threats and intimidation from some local Orthodox priests and congregations. On some occasions during the reporting period, local police were slow to prevent the harassment of non-Orthodox religious groups, including members of Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, and Pentecostals. Some politicians used the supremacy of the GOC in their platforms and criticized some Protestant groups, particularly evangelical groups, as subversive. Jehovah's Witnesses in particular were the targets of their derogatory comments.

A 2001 Supreme Court ruling revoking the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses, on the grounds that the law does not allow for registration of religious organizations, continues to restrict the group's ability to rent premises for services and import literature. The revocation resulted from a 1999 court case brought by former M.P. Sharadze seeking to ban the group on the grounds that it presented a threat to the State and the GOC. Although the Supreme Court emphasized that its ruling was based on technical legal grounds and was not to have the effect of banning the group, many local law enforcement officials interpreted the Supreme Court's ruling as a ban and have used it as a justification not to protect members of Jehovah's Witnesses from attacks by religious extremists. A case brought by Jehovah's Witnesses before the European Court of Human Rights challenging this annulment was pending at the end of the period covered by this report.

In April 2004, the Jehovah's Witnesses filed an application to build a place of worship on land they own in Telavi and were denied, because according to local authorities, the neighbors disliked them. The Jehovah's Witnesses appealed the decision, but an agreement was reached out of court. The Jehovah's Witnesses were given construction permission and they dropped their appeal. Construction has begun and should be completed by November. In early 2004, they were also denied use of a newly constructed Kingdom Hall in Samtredia. By the end of the year, they reached an agreement with the Government that once the group demolished an adjacent previously used building, which was in a hazardous condition, the Government would allow use of the new building.

On April 1, 2005, members of the Jehovah's Witnesses requested permission to use the Sports Palace in Tbilisi for a two-day religious convention for up to 5,000 persons. On April 18, the management of the Sports Palace responded that they would only be willing to accommodate such a convention if Jehovah's Witnesses obtained a guarantee from the State to provide security. Private companies usually provide security for such events, and representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses complained that it was an excessive demand and discriminatory to require them to apply to the state to provide security. Instead, the Jehovah's Witnesses held the conference without disturbance on their own property in Marneuli.

In November 2004, students at a State Religious Seminary wrote an open letter in which they accused the GOC of corruption. Subsequently, the Seminary's rector expelled some of the students. Members of the conservative Orthodox group "The Society of Saint David the Builder" assaulted several of these students. The students also attempted to register a nongovernmental organization (NGO) to defend the human rights of religious groups, but the Isani-Samgori district court in Tbilisi denied their request. According to the court's decision, it considered the NGO a religious organization and current law did not allow religious organizations to register as private entities.

In the past, customs and police officials sometimes seized literature of nontraditional religions, particularly that of the Jehovah's Witnesses. However, since January 2004 there have been no reported cases of seized literature or importation difficulties.

All public schools offered a course on religion, which exclusively taught the theology of Orthodox Christianity. While the course was elective, there was societal pressure for all students to take the course. The Patriarchate reportedly had exclusive influence over the course's material and local Orthodox Priests directed, and sometimes taught, the courses in several schools.

During the period covered by this report, students complained that teachers began most courses, including mathematics and science, by leading the class in a recitation of Orthodox prayers. Those who did not participate, including Muslim students, were sometimes punished. In many classrooms, teachers hung orthodox icons or pictures of Georgian Orthodox religious figures. Some schools reportedly have Orthodox chapels where students are encouraged to pray.

The GOC routinely reviews religious and other textbooks used in schools for consistency with Orthodox beliefs. Suggestions by the Church are almost always incorporated into textbooks prior to issue. By law, the Church has a consultative role in curriculum development but no veto power.

On January 22, 2005, the Ministry of Education and the Patriarchate of the GOC signed a joint memorandum reaffirming their cooperation in the field of education. The Memorandum created a joint working group to develop curriculum, choose teachers, and publish material for teaching Orthodox Christianity. In the memorandum, the Ministry agreed to financially assist the Church in its education projects and institutions and to include the Church in the development of new material for religious education. No other religious groups were afforded these privileges.

On April 7, 2005, the Ministry of Education of the Autonomous Republic of Ajara and the head bishop of the Ajarian Eparchy of the GOC signed an agreement of cooperation. According to the agreement, the Ajarian Government committed itself to provide assistance, including financing, to the GOC in Ajara and to establish joint pre-school and general education institutions. The government promised to include the Church in the preparation of teachers for religious history courses in public schools. No other religious groups were afforded these privileges.

The Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic Churches have been unable to secure the return of churches and other facilities closed during the Soviet period, many of which later were given to the Georgian Orthodox Church by the State. The prominent Armenian church in Tbilisi, Norashen, remained closed, as did four other smaller Armenian churches in Tbilisi and one in Akhaltsikhe. In addition, the Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic Churches, as with Protestant denominations, have had difficulty obtaining permission to construct new churches due to pressure from the GOC.

The Jewish community also experienced delays in the return of property confiscated during Soviet rule. By the end of the period covered by this report, a theater group still had not vacated the central hall of a former synagogue that the Government rented to it, despite a 2001 Supreme Court ruling instructing it to do so.

The Government of Georgia does not exercise authority over South Ossetia, nor over these separatist-controlled and unrecognized "Republic of Abkhazia;" therefore, regular and reliable information is difficult to obtain. Abkhaz "President" Vladislav Ardzinba's 1995 decree banning Jehovah's Witnesses in the region remains in effect, but is not enforced. During the reporting period, the Jehovah's Witnesses reported no problems in Abkhazia, where membership is approximately 1,500. Although Baptists, Lutherans, and Catholics also report they are allowed to operate in Abkhazia, the GOC reports it is unable to operate there. The Patriarch has expressed concern over Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) support of separatism in the region by subsidizing web sites that encourage secessionist sentiments. The GOC has also complained

that in addition to encouraging separatism, the Moscow Theological Seminary is training Abkhaz priests. Despite the fact that the ROC recognizes Georgia-Abkhazia territorial integrity, the GOC Patriarchy claims that the ROC is sending in priests loyal to Moscow, under the pretext of setting up indigenous Abkhaz churches.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

While there were fewer physical attacks on religious minority groups during the reporting period, harassment continued. Although police rarely facilitated harassment of religious minority groups, they sometimes denied protection to these groups. The Catholic Church continued to face difficulties in attempting to build churches in the towns of Kutaisi, Akhaltsikhe, Chiatura, and Ozurgeti. During the reporting period, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (including the police) and Procuracy did not aggressively pursue criminal cases against Orthodox extremists for their attacks against religious minorities.

From 1999 to 2003, followers of excommunicated Orthodox priest Basil Mkalavishvili (Basilists) engaged in numerous violent attacks on nontraditional religious minorities, including Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and especially Jehovah's Witnesses. On January 31, 2005, Basil Mkalavishvili was sentenced to 6 years' imprisonment, and two other colleagues also received prison sentences. Mkalavishvili's lawyers appealed this sentence, but the appeal was pending by the end of the reporting period. During the reporting period, no other criminal cases were commenced. Many acts of religious violence between 2000 and 2003 have gone unpunished, despite the filing of numerous criminal complaints.

There was sporadic harassment of members of nontraditional religions. Occasionally, local Orthodox priests and their congregation members verbally and physically threatened members of minority groups and prevented them from constructing places of worship and from holding worship services. Representatives of religious minority groups regularly filed complaints with the General Prosecutor and Ombudsman, but law enforcers rarely investigated the perpetrators.

In October 2004, a local Orthodox priest and members of his congregation in the eastern village of Velistsikhe verbally and physically threatened a local Baptist deacon, and prevented him from continuing construction on a Baptist church. No criminal investigation was opened.

An investigation into the June 2003 arson attack on a Baptist Church in Akhalsopheli remained pending at the end of the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Improvements Respect for Religious Freedom

In April, Parliament passed an amendment to the Civil Code allowing for the registration of religious organizations as private entities, giving them previously unobtainable legal status. While many religious groups praised the legislation, representatives of more traditional religions continued to push for special legal status that would set them apart from non-traditional religions. Some religious groups also complained that the amendment did not make provisions for registering property that religious groups already owned under personal titles. The Legal Committee agreed to hold consultations to help religious groups overcome this hurdle.

In contrast to previous years, no religious group reported difficulties importing literature or religious material. In November 2004, the Jehovah's Witnesses received their final shipment previously confiscated at customs and have since reported no problems in this regard. Jehovah's Witnesses also no longer feel the need to hold their services in private homes for security reasons, but have resumed meeting openly in their Kingdom Halls.

In April, Parliament passed a new law on general education. The law forbids the display of religious symbols on a public school's grounds unless the purpose is academic. The law also forbids religious indoctrination, proselytizing, forced assimilation, or the teaching of theology in public schools during school

hours. Students are allowed to study religion and conduct religious rituals after school hours, but neither a teacher nor any other outside party, such as a priest, may participate unless invited by the students. Prayers and other rituals may no longer be conducted during school hours.

In October 2004, the Government paid Jehovah's Witness Mirian Arabidze compensation for moral damages concerning a wrongful conviction in 2001 that stemmed from attacks by followers of defrocked Orthodox priest Basil Mkalavishvili.

In October 2004, the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of the Russian-language Pentecostal congregation headed by Pastor Nikolai Kalutski. In 2003, protestors blockaded Kalutski's home in Tbilisi for several weeks to prevent his congregation from attending worship services. In response, local police banned the use of the private home for religious services. The Constitutional Court ruled that the congregation's rights had been violated by the police ban and ordered the police to protect the congregation from neighbors' and others' threats. Since then, the police have been relatively responsive in protecting the congregation. However, in April and May, in the face of continued neighbor protests, the Ombudsman agreed to help the congregation find a more suitable worship place. The Ministry of Justice has since begun consultations with the congregation to this end.

On January 31, defrocked Orthodox priest Basil Mkalavishvili was sentenced to six years imprisonment for inciting and conducting religiously motivated violence. His colleagues Petre Ivanidze and Merab Koroshinadze were sentenced to four and one year prison terms, respectively.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The public's attitude towards religion is ambivalent, according to numerous public opinion polls. Although many residents are not particularly observant, the link between the country's Orthodoxy and ethnic and national identity is strong.

Relations between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims are very good. Since the fall of 1996, Sunni and Shi'a have worshipped together in Tbilisi's mosque. Relations between Muslims and Christians are also quite good. Despite occasional media reports of minor incidents of violence between ethnic Azeris and ethnic Georgians or ethnic Armenians, these do not appear to be motivated by religious differences.

There are few problems between religious minority groups. In April 2004, Muslims and Lutherans united to build a sports stadium in the Dmanisi District. Construction was finished later in the year and the stadium has been open for public use since that time.

In September 2004, an ecumenical memorial service was held for the victims of the terrorist attack in Beslan, southern Russia and for the victims of the terrorist attack at New York's World Trade Center. Representatives from most Protestant denominations and from the Muslim and Jewish faiths participated. On February 4, 2005 a multi-faith service was held in Tbilisi. Leaders from the Armenian Apostolic, Baptist, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic Churches attended. Reportedly, imprisoned defrocked Orthodox priest Basil Mkalavishvili participated in the service by cellular phone.

The Jewish communities reported that they have encountered few societal problems. There was no historical pattern of anti-Semitism in the country, nor were there any reported incidents during the period covered by this report.

The Patriarch of the GOC invited several representatives from religious minorities to participate in the November 2004 opening of the national cathedral. After the ceremonies, the Patriarch invited these representatives to his residence, where he gave them each a gift of wine to thank them for their participation. Participants included those religious minorities who signed the 2002 Concordat between the GOC and the Government, including the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Lutheran Church, the Baptist Church of Georgia, Muslim representatives, and Jewish representatives. Non-signatories were not invited.

Despite their genuine and historical tolerance toward minority religious groups traditional to the country--including Catholics, Armenian Apostolic Christians, Jews, and Muslims--many citizens remain apprehensive about Protestants and other nontraditional religions, which they often view as taking advantage of the populace's economic hardship by gaining membership through economic assistance to converts. Many members of the GOC and the public view religious minorities, especially nontraditional groups of evangelical Protestants or so-called "sects," as a threat to the national Church and the country's cultural values. In response to a June 2005 survey conducted by a reputable polling organization, 73 percent responded that Jehovah's Witnesses create serious problems for society and 87 percent felt the group should be banned.

During the year, there were several incidents of harassment directed towards nontraditional religious groups, particularly Jehovah's Witnesses. In July 2004 in Ozurgeti, an employee of the local Mayor's office

verbally and physically threatened two representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses who were proselytizing door-to-door. Although the victims filed a complaint with the local Prosecutor's Office and Mayor's Office, no charges were brought. In November 2004, a Jehovah's Witness representative was threatened several times for using his house to hold worship services in Kareli. In one incident, unknown persons broke the door to his house and stole a tape recorder. In June 2005, renovations to a Jehovah's Witnesses' meeting house in Kutaisi were halted due to attacks by angry neighbors. Victims in the attacks have filed criminal complaints with authorities and an investigation is underway. These attacks were accompanied by specific verbal threats against the Jehovah's Witnesses clearly motivated by 'not in my back yard' sentiments. At about the same time as the attacks at the renovation site, the Jehovah's Witnesses conducted a regular congress in Kutaisi without incident.

In 2003, in the Merve Polki region, Besik Gazdeliani verbally and physically assaulted a group of Jehovah's Witnesses. Although complaints were filed with authorities, including the Prosecutor General's office and the Ombudsman, no action was taken to hold him responsible. In 2003 in Senaki, approximately 40 persons reportedly verbally and physically assaulted several Jehovah's Witnesses. The attackers confiscated religious literature and personal belongings of the victims. After a complaint was filed with the Prosecutor General and the Ombudsman, authorities began a preliminary investigation, which ended soon after when they decided not to initiate a case.

On September 12, 2004, several local residents verbally and physically threatened a group of Russian Pentecostals attempting to hold services in a private house in Tbilisi. The pastor called the police, who arrived promptly to control the crowd. According to the pastor, although police came to the residence to investigate allegations on three occasions, they asked him not to file an official statement about the incident. On April 28, an Orthodox group came to the residence and again physically and verbally threatened the congregation. Police arrived to provide a safe cordon for congregation members to enter the house, and hold services. The Ombudsman also came to avert violence. Participants complained that the Pentecostal services were disruptive, to which the Ombudsman agreed to assist the Pentecostal congregation to find a new building for services. Nevertheless, on May 13, the congregation again held services in the house and protestors again came and verbally and physically harassed congregation members. Again the police came to protect the congregation. The Ministry of Interior opened a criminal investigation into these incidents.

In October 2004, local citizens vandalized a Baptist pastor's house in the eastern village of Kuchatani, which was used for worship services. That same month, in the southern town of Bolnisi, the front door of a Lutheran church was vandalized and written threats were posted to the door.

In March 2005, in the city of Rustavi, neighbors threatened to burn down the Seventh-Day Adventists' worship hall if they held a planned conference. When representatives of the Adventists reported these threats to the police, the police did not react; they then addressed the Liberty Institute, which intervened with the police on their behalf. The police then agreed to prevent any disturbance during their planned conference. During the one-day conference, a woman entered the church and verbally harassed the congregation. The next day, reporters from the television channel Rustavi 2 came to the worship hall to report on the incident. In the televised report, which portrayed Adventists in a negative light, GOC Priest Zurab Tskhovrebadze warned locals against Adventists and implied that the religion was not Christian. Subsequent newspaper articles falsely attacked the Adventists' humanitarian organization for indoctrinating children with anti-Orthodox beliefs.

Local Orthodox priests and public school teachers vocally criticized minority religions and interfaith marriages. Some also discouraged Orthodox followers from any interaction with students who belonged to Protestant churches. Sometimes teachers ridiculed students who had converted to Protestant faiths, claiming the students converted because they were offered financial benefits.

The GOC withdrew its membership from the World Council of Churches in 1997 in order to appease clerics strongly opposed to ecumenism. The Patriarchy of the GOC has strongly criticized the attacks perpetrated by Orthodox extremists against nontraditional religious minorities and has distanced itself from Mkalavishvili. However, some Orthodox Church officials have had ties to the Jvari organization, which has committed numerous acts of violence against religious minorities. During the period covered by this report, Jvari became less active, whereas the fundamentalist Orthodox society named the Society of Saint David the Builder became more active and vocal against religious minorities and against tolerance within the Orthodox Church.

Many problems among traditional religious groups stem from property disputes. The Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic Churches have been unable to secure the return of their churches and other facilities that were closed during the Soviet period, many of which later were given to the GOC by the State. The prominent Armenian church in Tbilisi, Norashen, remains closed, as do four other smaller Armenian churches in Tbilisi and one in Akhaltsikhe. The Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic Churches, as well as Protestant denominations, have had difficulty obtaining permission to construct new churches, reportedly in part as a result of pressure from the GOC. GOC authorities have accused Armenian believers of purposely altering some existing Georgian churches so that they would be mistaken for Armenian churches. Armenian representatives accuse Georgian believers of the same activities.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Government repeatedly raised its concerns regarding harassment of and attacks against nontraditional religious minorities with senior government officials, including the President, Parliament Speaker, Internal Affairs and Justice Ministers, and the Prosecutor General. Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, frequently met with representatives of the Government, Parliament, various religious confessions, and NGOs concerned with religious freedom issues.

Embassy officials attended the trial of defrocked Orthodox Priest Basil Mkalavishvili, including the sentencing hearing in January 2005.

Embassy officials supported and attended a December 2004 conference on religious tolerance and legislation sponsored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and hosted by the Parliament. Embassy officials also encouraged Parliamentarians to support the conference. Embassy officials continued to meet with Parliamentarians to encourage passage of legislation allowing for registration of religious groups. Parliament passed the law in April 2005. Embassy officials encouraged religious minority groups to support the efforts of the State Ombudsman in regards to religious freedom by participating in his roundtables and new initiatives.

In April 2005, the Ambassador attended a reception conducted by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to show gratitude and support for local Jewish communities. In May 2005, the Ambassador attended the reopening of a Baptist church in Akhalsopeli that was burned down by arsonists in 2003. In June 2005, the Ambassador attended the opening of the Baptist Beteli Social Center in Tbilisi.

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