

*Georgia (87)**65*

U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Georgia**International Religious Freedom Report 2002**

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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.

The status of religious freedom continued to deteriorate, attacks increased in frequency, and acts of violence occurred with impunity during the period covered by this report. Local police and security officials continued to harass nontraditional religious minority groups, particularly local and foreign missionaries and were complicit, or in some cases actually participated in or facilitated attacks against members of such groups. Police failed to respond to continued attacks by Orthodox extremists, largely followers of Father Basil Mkalavishvili, against members of Jehovah's Witnesses and other nontraditional religious minorities.

Citizens generally do not interfere with traditional religious groups; however, there is widespread suspicion of nontraditional religious groups, and the number of incidents in which Orthodox extremists harassed and attacked such groups, especially members of Jehovah's Witnesses, continued to increase.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. The U.S. Government repeatedly raised its concerns about harassment of and attacks against nontraditional religious minorities with senior government officials.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of approximately 25,900 square miles and its population is approximately 4.4 million. Most ethnic Georgians (approximately 70 percent of the population, according to the preliminary results of the 2002 census) nominally associate themselves with the Georgian Orthodox Church. Orthodox churches serving other non-Georgian ethnic groups, such as Russians and Greeks, are subordinate to the Georgian Orthodox Church. Non-Georgian Orthodox Churches generally use the language of their communicants. In addition, there are a small number of mostly ethnic Russian adherents from two dissident Orthodox schools: the Malakani Staroveriy (Old Believers); and Dukhoboriy, the majority of whom have left the country. Under Soviet rule, the number of active churches and priests declined sharply and religious education was nearly nonexistent. Membership in the Georgian Orthodox Church has continued to increase since independence in 1991. The Church maintains 4 theological seminaries, 2 academies, several schools, and 27 church dioceses; and has 700 priests, 250 monks, and 150 nuns. The Church is headed by Catholicos Patriarch, Ilya 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. A large number of Armenians live in the southern Javakheti region, in which they constitute a majority of the population. Islam is prevalent among Azerbaijani and north Caucasus ethnic communities in the eastern part of the country and also is found in the regions of Ajara and Abkhazia. Approximately 5 percent of the population are nominally Muslim. Judaism, which has been present since ancient times, is practiced in a number of communities throughout the country, especially in the largest cities of Tbilisi and Kutaisi.

Approximately 8,000 Jews remain in the country, following 2 large waves of emigration, the first in the early 1970's and the second in the period of perestroika during the late 1980's. Before then, Jewish officials estimate there were as many as 100,000 Jews in the country. There also are small numbers of Lutheran worshipers, mostly among descendants of German communities that first settled in the country several hundred years ago. A small number of Kurdish Yezidis have lived in the country for centuries.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Protestant denominations have become more prominent. They include Baptists (composed of Russian, Georgian, Armenian, Ossetian, and Kurdish groups); Seventh-Day Adventists; Pentecostals (both Georgian and Russian); members of Jehovah's Witnesses (local representatives state that the group has been in the country since 1953 and has approximately 15,000 adherents); the New Apostolic Church; and the Assemblies of God. There also are a few Baha'is and Hare Krishnas. Except for Jehovah's Witnesses, there are no available member numbers on these groups; however, their membership combined is most likely fewer than 1,000 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 police and 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 draft constitutional agreement (concordat), which further specifies church-state relations between the Government and the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church, has been discussed however, it was not proposed formally to the Parliament at the end of the period covered by this report.

There are no laws regarding the registration of religious organizations; however, the Ministry of Justice has prepared and submitted to Parliament a draft bill that provides for registration of all religious confessions in the country. The bill has not yet been submitted to Parliament.

Religious groups that perform humanitarian services may be registered as charitable organizations, although religious and other organizations may perform humanitarian services without registration. Organizations that are not registered may not rent office space or import literature, among other activities. Individual members of unregistered organizations may engage in these activities as individuals, but in such cases are exposed to personal legal liability.

While the National Security Council's human rights representative, the chairwoman of the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee, and the Government Ombudsman have been effective advocates for religious freedom in a number of instances, the Ministry of Interior (including the police) and Procuracy generally have failed to pursue criminal cases against Orthodox extremists for their continued attacks against religious minorities. The Ministry of Internal Affairs was reorganized to include a deputy minister, who created an office that has duties including investigating religious violence. On the few occasions in which investigations into such attacks have been opened, they have proceeded very slowly.

During the Soviet era, the Georgian Orthodox Church largely was suppressed, as were many other religious institutions; many churches were destroyed or turned into museums, concert halls, and other secular establishments. As a result of new policies regarding religion implemented by the Soviet government in the late 1980's, the present Patriarch began 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 Bolshevik Revolution. (Church authorities have claimed that 20 to 30 percent of the land at one time belonged to the Church.)

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Georgian Orthodox Church enjoys a tax-exempt status not available to other religious groups. In 2001 Parliament amended the Constitution to allow for ultimate adoption of a concordat between the Church and the State, supported by the Church, which would define relations between the two. While a final concordat draft had not been completed by the end of the period covered by this report, earlier versions covered several controversial topics, including transfer to the Church of ownership of church treasures expropriated during the Soviet period and held in state museums and repositories; government compensation to the Church for moral and material damage inflicted by the Soviets; and government assistance in establishing after-school Orthodox religious courses in educational institutions and Orthodox chaplaincies in the military and in prisons. The 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, even before the introduction of associated constitutional amendments on March 20, 2002. Representatives of nontraditional religious minority groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals, were not included in this process. The prospect of such a concordat has raised concerns among nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) that believe that it would discriminate against religious minorities. The Georgian Orthodox Church had lobbied Parliament and the Government for laws that would grant it special status and restrict the activities of missionaries from nontraditional religions. However, parliamentary leaders have indicated that prior to adoption, the final concordat draft is expected to be sent to the Council of Europe, European Parliament, and European Union for informal expert analysis, to ensure that it accords with European norms and the Government's international legal obligations.

While most citizens practice their religion without restriction, the worship of some citizens, particularly members of nontraditional faiths, has been restricted by intimidation and the use of force by rightwing nationalists whom the Government has failed to control. Some nationalist politicians continue to use the issue of the continued supremacy of the Georgian Orthodox Church in their platforms, and criticized some Protestant groups, especially evangelical groups, as subversive. Jehovah's Witnesses in particular are the target of attacks from such politicians, most prominently Member of Parliament Guram Sharadze.

In addition, a February 2001 Supreme Court ruling upheld a 2000 appeals court decision revoking the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses on the grounds that the law does not allow for registration of religious organizations. The effect of the Court decision has restricted the group's ability to rent premises for services and importing literature. The revocation of the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses resulted from a 1999 court case brought by Sharadze seeking to ban the group on the grounds that it presented a

threat to the State and the Georgian Orthodox Church.

The Supreme Court emphasized that its ruling was based on technical legal grounds and was not to have the effect of banning the group; however, many local law enforcement officials interpreted the ruling as a ban, and thus used it as a justification not to protect members of Jehovah's Witnesses from attacks by religious extremists. The court decision did not have the effect of revoking the registration of other religious organizations, since the case was brought against Jehovah's Witnesses only.

The Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic Churches have been unable to secure the return of their churches and other facilities closed during the Soviet period, many of which later were given to the Georgian Orthodox Church by the State. A prominent Armenian Church in Tbilisi remained closed, and 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 Georgian Orthodox Church. On April 5, 2002, the Catholic Union of Western Georgia filed suit in a Tbilisi court against the Patriarchate for return of the Annunciation cathedral in Kutaisi, in the west.

In 2001 the Ministry of Interior (including the police) and Procuracy generally failed to pursue criminal cases against Orthodox extremists for their attacks against religious minorities. On the few occasions in which there were investigations into such attacks, they have proceeded very slowly.

The Jewish community also experienced delays in the return of property confiscated during Soviet rule. In 1997 the courts ordered that a former synagogue, which had been rented from the Government by a theater group, be returned to the Jewish community. The theater group refused to comply and began a publicity campaign with anti-Semitic overtones to justify its continued occupation of the building. In 1998 President Shevardnadze promised Jewish leaders that the synagogue would be returned before the 2,600-year celebration of Jewish settlement in the country. However, the President's order was not enforced, and the theater group brought suit, claiming that the building never was a synagogue. The court referred the issue to a panel of experts for evaluation. In 2000 the panel informed the court that it had come to a split decision on whether the building had been a synagogue. In April 2001, the Supreme Court ruled that the central hall of the synagogue should be returned to the Jewish community, but that the theater groups should retain part of the building. However, by the end of the period covered by this report, the theater group had not vacated the central hall.

In April 2001, Jehovah's Witnesses representative Arno Tungler was denied an entry visa at Tbilisi Airport, despite having an official accreditation from the Ministry of Justice. Tungler later received a visa and was allowed entry into the country.

According to some local human rights groups, as a result of pressure from the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Ministry of Education prevented the use of several school textbooks on the history of religion because they did not give absolute precedence to Orthodox Christianity. The textbooks eventually were published and introduced into the school system after the incorporation of changes requested by the Church. However, under the November law, the Church was given a consultative role in curriculum development but has no veto power. On a number of occasions, members of Jehovah's Witnesses encountered difficulty importing religious literature into the country. Shipments were delayed by the Customs Department for lengthy periods of time.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Local police and security officials continued to harass at times nontraditional religious minority groups, especially members of Jehovah's Witnesses. The police only sporadically intervened to protect such minorities from attacks by Orthodox extremists. In some cases police, actually participated in or facilitated the attacks. The Catholic Church faced difficulties in attempting to build churches in the towns of Kutaisi and Akhaltsikhe.

Since October 1999, followers of excommunicated Orthodox priest Basili Mkalavishvili (Basilists) have engaged in more than 80 violent attacks on nontraditional religious minorities, including Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, and especially members of Jehovah's Witnesses. Throughout the period covered by this report, the Basilists, as well as members of an Orthodox extremist group called "Jvari" (Cross), continued their series of attacks, at times together. The attacks involved burning religious literature, including the Bible; breaking up religious gatherings; and beating up parishioners, in some cases with nail-studded sticks and clubs. The attacks have been publicized widely, in part by the Basilists themselves who videotape the incidents. Most acts of religious violence have gone unpunished, despite the filing of more than 700 criminal complaints. Due to a pending criminal case, Mkalavishvili has not participated in several attacks; however, he did participate in the May 7, 2002, attack against Stereo 1, 1 month after a court denied a prosecution request for preliminary detention of Mkalavishvili. Evidence strongly suggests that Mkalavishvili has directed numerous attacks.

Although law enforcement authorities were present during some of the attacks, in most instances, they failed to intervene, leading to a widespread belief in police complicity in the activities of the Basilists and an atmosphere of impunity surrounding the religious attacks.

During the period covered by this report, Basilists continued to harass several families of Jehovah's Witnesses, demanding that they stop holding meetings in their homes. Because of the continuing violence, the Jehovah's Witnesses have refrained from public meetings in favor of gatherings in private homes.

On September 16, 2001, the police and followers of Mkalavishvili prevented members of Jehovah's Witnesses from holding a convention in Marneuli by stopping buses, physically attacking followers, and burning and looting the convention site. Members of Jehovah's Witnesses alleged that police actively participated in these activities, and at least one eyewitness confirmed that police did not impede the Basilists. On September 19, the head of the Marneuli district administration was dismissed for undisclosed reasons following the incident. An investigation was ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report.

On September 23, 2001, Basilists attacked a choir practice of a Pentecostal church group in the Tbilisi suburb of Gldani. The attackers, led by Mkalavishvili, beat the attendants with wooden clubs and crosses, dragged parishioners by their hair, and threw women and children to the ground. They also damaged the pastor's car. The local police arrived only after the Basilists had left the scene. Police limited their action to taking a report of the incident.

On September 28, 2001, Mkalavishvili and between 70 and 100 supporters, armed with stones, clubs, and bicycle spokes, blocked the highway at Tbilisi's Ponichala road junction. They established their own checkpoint within 300 meters of a traffic police checkpoint, at which from 8 to 10 traffic and regular police were observed to be present. Mkalavishvili's group filtered traffic, seeking cars and buses taking members of Jehovah's Witnesses to a planned convention in the southern town of Marneuli. They attacked and beat any Jehovah's Witnesses they found, causing numerous injuries and also damaging the vehicles in which the victims were traveling. The nearby police refused to intervene. A Jehovah's Witnesses organization reported that its representatives made urgent telephone calls to many officials of various levels of responsibility in the police, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the General Procuracy, yet no intervention followed.

On September 30, 2001, approximately 14 men from the Jvari organization raided a Jehovah's Witnesses prayer meeting in Rustavi, and allegedly beat members of the congregation and seized religious literature.

On December 23, 2001, Mkalavishvili and approximately 50 supporters in Tbilisi broke up the church service of the Word of Life Church that was being held in a cinema. As the morning service was ending, the Basilists entered the cinema ringing bells. The attackers severely beat two church members; broke the sound system; stole church money, a music synthesizer and personal handbags; and seized and tore up religious books, including copies of the Bible. Mkalavishvili reportedly used a mobile telephone to direct the attack from outside the cinema to avoid legal consequences related to his ongoing trial.

On January 25, 2002, a mob of Basilists surrounded the building housing television channel Stereo One. The Basilists had been threatening Tbilisi-based Stereo One since early 2001 for broadcasting the American Evangelical program "The Victorious Voice of the Believer" dubbed into Russian. Two Basilists who broke into the building were arrested by the police. However, a crowd of 100 Basilists who quickly gathered outside the police station demanded their release. The police complied with their demand. Stereo One resumed broadcasting the religious program after briefly ceasing transmission in February despite continued threats by Mkalavishvili. On May 7, 2002, Mkalavishvili and four followers again tried to break into the offices of Stereo One, physically assaulting one staff member. The police responded promptly after being alerted by a local human rights NGO.

On February 3, 2002, Mkalavishvili gathered a mob of 150 followers and seized a warehouse owned by the Baptist Union. During the raid, the Basilists burned thousands of copies of the Bible and other religious literature. As during other attacks, Mkalavishvili held an impromptu press conference with the violence in the background.

On April 7, 2002, a group of 25 Basilists armed with truncheons stormed a meeting of members of Jehovah's Witnesses in the village of Ponichala outside Tbilisi. The attackers assaulted participants, damaged the house, and stole religious literature as well as personal property.

On September 3, 2001, Mkalavishvili and Petre Ivanidze were charged with unlawful entry, assault, persecution of an individual on account of his beliefs, constraint of freedom, and unlawful violation of carrying out religious customs. However, they were not detained. Their trial on these charges began on January 25, 2002, but was postponed repeatedly, principally due to the lack of courtroom security for victims and witnesses or absences of prosecutors. The Didube-Chugureti city court consistently refused to provide adequate police guards for security while permitting hundreds of Basilists, armed with wooden and iron crosses—which have been used previously to attack religious minorities—effectively to commandeer the courtroom and intimidate arriving attorneys and witnesses. On April 1, 2002, the presiding judge issued a final sentence refusing the prosecution's request for preliminary detention of Mkalavishvili as part of the ongoing trial. On March 9, 2002, Human Rights Watch addressed an open letter to President Shevardnadze urging law enforcement authorities to promptly and fairly conclude the court case against Mkalavishvili by taking Mkalavishvili into pretrial detention and ensuring the physical safety of trial participants.

The court's failure to provide adequate courtroom security stood in stark contrast to the overwhelming police protection provided during a related court case against Mkalavishvili for a March 2002 assault on three police officers near his Gldani-based church. The Ministry of Interior provided more than 200 security police and special weapons and tactics team members for that hearing during which Mkalavishvili was acquitted in March 2002.

On May 13, 2002, the Marneuli district court acquitted police officers of wrongdoing during an attack by Basilists on a September 2000 Congress of Jehovah's Witnesses in Marneuli. Mkalavishvili and his followers had destroyed the premises for a Jehovah's Witnesses conference in Marneuli and physically assaulted and robbed several dozen members of Jehovah's Witnesses while police looked on. Police also had prevented a number of buses carrying Jehovah's Witnesses from reaching the conference. Similar events occurred during the September 28, 2001, Congress of the Jehovah's Witnesses, when Basilists again attacked the congregation while local police forces ignored the assault. On September 19, the head of the Marneuli district administration was dismissed for undisclosed reasons following the incident. An investigation was ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report.

On January 22, 2001, Mkalavishvili broke up a press conference in which members of Jehovah's Witnesses were presenting a petition with 130,000 signatures demanding government action against religious violence. Basilists seized and fled with most of the volumes of signatures. In April and May 2001, following the opening of a criminal case against Mkalavishvili, Basilists continued their attacks against members of Jehovah's Witnesses, which included several cases in which peaceful religious gatherings in Tbilisi, Rustavi, and other locales were broken up and members of Jehovah's Witnesses were beaten with sticks and clubs. Mkalavishvili publicly encouraged these attacks, although he did not participate due to fear of potential legal consequences.

On March 14, 2001, Basilists, with the assistance of traffic police, stopped a truck in Mtskheta carrying books imported by the United Bible Society and attempted to seize and burn them.

In May 2001, an appeals court overturned charges of hooliganism against a member of Jehovah's Witnesses and returned the case to the lower court for further investigation. This case began in October 1999, when Basilists violently attacked a worship service of 120 parishioners in the Gldani district of Tbilisi. The Gldani police refused to intervene, and 16 persons were injured in the attack. In December 1999, the case was forwarded to the Gldani prosecutor's office for criminal charges. Despite the advocacy by the National Security Advisor for Human Rights on Jehovah's Witnesses' behalf, in January 2000, the Gldani regional prosecutor's office returned the case to the city prosecutor's office, stating that no violation had occurred. The case has been reopened and closed on several occasions since then. While it is ongoing, the investigation is proceeding very slowly. In June 2000, the investigators charged two of the defendants with hooliganism stemming from the incident. They were convicted in court in September 2000, and received suspended sentences. One of the two appealed his conviction. International organizations such as the U.N. Human Rights Committee and the Council of Europe have admonished the Government's poor record in adequately redressing the deterioration of religious freedom.

On May 17, 2002, the Council of Europe Commission against Racism and Intolerance released a report that strongly criticized the authorities' disregard of religious and racial violence and harassment in the country. The report placed particular emphasis on the harassment of religious minorities. In response to the report, President Shevardnadze announced a special Government session on human rights, which has since been postponed. On May 17, 2002, President Shevardnadze issued a decree announcing government measures to improve the human rights situation including the protection of the rights of religious minorities but without concrete results.

On May 20, 2002, several dozen followers of Mkalavishvili held protest demonstrations in front of the American Embassy and at the Office of the Public Defender. The protesters criticized a letter sent to President Shevardnadze by 15 U.S. Senators and Members of Congress, who are members of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, urging the Government to enforce the law and protect citizens against criminal attacks from religious extremists.

The Assemblies of God, several of whose members were beaten and abused verbally by police officials while conducting outdoor services in Tbilisi in May 1999, appealed to the European Court in Strasbourg, Germany. The police officials who interrupted the service sought to obtain the names of the church members. Members of the Assemblies of God assert that they remain under local police surveillance. A number of members of the congregation were hesitant to return to their apartments and cars for a few days after the police actions. In September 1999, the group brought suit against the police and lost. The group alleged that the leader of a radical Orthodox group exerted pressure on the court. The suit later was appealed to the Supreme Court, which dismissed it in 2000. The group then appealed to the European Court, where the case remained pending at the end of the period covered by this report.

Regular and reliable information regarding the separatist controlled "Republic of Abkhazia," which is not recognized by any country and over which the Government of Georgia does not exercise control, is difficult to obtain. A 1995 decree by the Abkhaz "President," Vladislav Ardzinba, that banned Jehovah's Witnesses in Abkhazia remains in effect. A number of members of Jehovah's Witnesses have been detained in the last few years; however, according to a representative of Jehovah's Witnesses, none were in detention at the end of the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There are 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.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The public's attitude towards religion is ambivalent. Although many residents are not particularly observant religiously, the link between Georgian Orthodoxy and Georgian ethnic and national identity is strong.

Despite their general 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 view as taking advantage of the populace's economic hardship by gaining membership through handing out economic assistance to converts. Some members of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the public view non-Orthodox religious groups, especially nontraditional groups or so-called "sects" as a threat to the national Church and Georgian cultural values and have argued that foreign Christian missionaries should confine their activities to non-Christian areas.

The Patriarchy of the Georgian Orthodox Church has criticized strongly the attacks perpetrated by Orthodox extremists against nontraditional religious minorities and has distanced itself from the excommunicated priest Basil Mkalavishvili. However, on February 10, 2002, a senior bishop based in the city of Rustavi stated on a leading television news program that all 'sectarians' (including nontraditional religious minorities such as the Jehovah's Witnesses) in the country should be killed. The bishop also voiced his support for Mkalavishvili. The Patriarchy later released a press statement in response saying that the bishop's comments were quoted out of context. Some observers believe that problems such as the bishop's statement and the actions of some priests, such as the leaders of mobs in 2001 in Sachkhere and Martvili, may be due to the fact that many priests were ordained 10 years ago without the appropriate educational background and training in an attempt to meet the requirements of growing congregations with the fall of Communism.

The Georgian Orthodox Church withdrew its membership from the World Council of Churches in 1997 in order to appease clerics strongly opposed to ecumenism. Church officials and nationalists criticized some Protestant groups—especially evangelical groups—as being subversive. In a signed document, eleven leaders of the Georgian Orthodox Church have argued that Christian missionaries should confine their activities to non-Christian areas.

Religious leaders of different faiths have spoken out against such criticism. Some NGO's advocate removing the clause in the Constitution concerning the Church's special role, claiming that it contradicts the Constitution's provisions regarding religious freedom.

The Muslim and Jewish communities report that they have encountered few societal problems. There is no historical pattern of anti-Semitism.

Nationalistic politicians manipulated reports of the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses in order to create public hostility. In April 2000, one politician inaccurately publicized the case of a hospitalized member of Jehovah's Witnesses who refused a blood transfusion and certain forms of medical treatment. The event was covered widely in the press and sparked a brief public debate over religious beliefs and medical ethics.

Many of the problems among traditional religious groups stem from disputes over property. 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 Georgian Orthodox Church by the State. A prominent Armenian church in Tbilisi remains closed and the Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic Churches, with Protestant denominations, have had difficulty obtaining permission to construct new churches, reportedly in part as a result of pressure from the Georgian Orthodox Church. Georgian Orthodox Church authorities have accused Armenian believers of purposely altering some existing Georgian churches so that they would be mistaken for Armenian churches. The Catholic Church successfully completed the construction of a new church in Batumi in June 2000.

In June 2002, Mkalavishvili and several dozen of his followers held a noisy but peaceful rally in Tbilisi to protest a new draft law on religion prepared by the Ministry of Justice, stating that the law would effectively legalize "criminal sects."

On March 6, 2001, four Orthodox priests led a mob in an attack on members of Jehovah's Witnesses in Sachkhere. The mayor and local police chief refused to intervene, and local law enforcement officials warned that there would be further attacks. There was no investigation or arrests made by the end of the period covered by this report.

On March 24, 2001, eight visiting foreign Assembly of God members were attacked by a mob of Basilists, who stole their camera equipment and inflicted minor injuries upon them. Police reportedly were present and observed the attack but made no effort to intervene. In June 2001, a mob that included 30 Orthodox priests attacked Jehovah's Witnesses during a meeting in the western city of Martvili. The mob assaulted two women, beating one with a stick and striking the other in the face while the priests looked on. There was no investigation or arrests made by the end of the period covered by this report.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. On several occasions during the period covered by this report, senior U.S. Government officials, including the Ambassador, raised U.S. Government concerns regarding harassment of and attacks against nontraditional religious minorities with senior government officials, including the President, Parliament Speaker, and Internal Affairs and Justice Ministers. In April 2002, Senator Gordon Smith, a member of the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, strongly criticized unpunished religious violence in the country and called upon the Government to prosecute vigorously extremists who have attacked nontraditional religious minorities. A May 17, 2002, letter written by the Commission and signed by 15 Senators called on President Shevardnadze to end violence against groups of religious minorities in the country. Acknowledging the letter, President Shevardnadze again strongly criticized abuses and urged Parliament to adopt quickly a law on religion drafted by the Ministry of Justice. Embassy officials frequently met with representatives of the Government, Parliament, of various religious confessions, as well as with NGO's concerned with religious freedom issues.

In April 2002, a visiting representative from the Department of State's Office of International Religious Freedom met with members of the Government, various religious confessions and NGO's concerned with religious freedom issues, and underscored the need for the Government to end religious violence.

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