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GEORGIA: Violent priest to challenge temporary detention order

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Violent Old Calendarist priest Basil Mkalavishvili is to challenge a 4 June district court order that he be held in "preventive detention" for three months. His appeal is to be heard on 9 June at Tbilisi city court. The Baptists have been told that the closed preliminary hearing was connected with the case against Mkalavishvili for raiding a Baptist warehouse and burning copies of the Bible in February 2002. "I don't think they're going to arrest him," Malkhaz Songulashvili, head of the Baptist Union, told Forum 18 News Service. Levan Ramishvili of the Liberty Institute was equally sceptical. "If they had wanted to arrest him it would not have been difficult." Mkalavishvili – who has gone into hiding – has expressed defiance in a television interview, cursing his enemies and warning that Georgia will be struck by earthquakes if he is detained.

Violent Old Calendarist priest Basil Mkalavishvili is to challenge an order by a local court in the capital Tbilisi that he should be held in "preventive detention" for three months. His appeal is to be heard on 9 June at Tbilisi city court against the detention order handed down on 4 June by the court of Vake-Saburtalo district. Malkhaz Songulashvili, bishop of the Baptist Union, told Forum 18 News Service from Tbilisi on 5 June that his church has been told that the closed preliminary hearing was connected with the case against Mkalavishvili for raiding a Baptist warehouse and burning copies of the Bible in February 2002. "It is very strange. We weren't called to the court, so we don't know if it is true it was to do with our case." Mkalavishvili – who has gone into hiding – has expressed defiance in a television interview.

Songulashvili was sceptical that the police will move against Mkalavishvili. "I don't think they're going to arrest him," he declared. His scepticism was shared by Levan Ramishvili, the head of the Tbilisi-based Liberty Institute, which has defended religious minorities. "The police should fulfil the order but they say they don't know where Mkalavishvili is. Yet Rustavi-2 television was able to find him after the hearing and broadcast a long interview with him," Ramishvili told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 5 June. "If they had wanted to arrest him it would not have been difficult."

Forum 18 tried to reach Mkalavishvili on 5 June, but his home and mobile telephones went unanswered.

Mkalavishvili, who is under the spiritual authority of Greek Old Calendarist bishop Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili, has organised and led a series of violent attacks over the past few years on religious minorities, including Baptists, Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses. Repeated government claims that Mkalavishvili and other violent self-appointed vigilantes will be brought to court and sentenced for their violent activity have not so far seen any successful prosecution (see F18News 6 May 2003).

Gennady Gudadze, leader of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia, is slightly encouraged by the detention order, but remains sceptical. "On one side it is moral support to those who have been injured by him," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 5 June, "but he's not been detained so far and is still at large. Let's wait and see what happens."

On 4 June, a mob of Mkalavishvili supporters turned up outside the Vake-Saburtalo court and noisily demonstrated their support for him, although Mkalavishvili himself did not attend the preliminary hearing. "There was lots of pushing and shouting," Alex Anderson, Tbilisi representative for Human Rights Watch, told Forum 18 from the city on 5 June. "Mkalavishvili went into hiding, but Rustavi-2 was able to find him. In the evening interview, he cursed his enemies and warned that if he was detained Georgia would be struck by earthquakes."

In a separate, long-running case in Tbilisi's Didube-Chugureti district court covering three of Mkalavishvili's attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses, the Jehovah's Witnesses refused to turn up at the latest hearing, held on 13 May, arguing that their security would not be guaranteed in the courtroom. At most of the 21 sessions in the case so far, Mkalavishvili has argued with a mob of supporters who threaten and intimidate the Jehovah's Witnesses. On several occasions Jehovah's Witnesses and human rights observers have been beaten by the mob. Gudadze told Forum 18 that the judge has told their lawyers that he is looking for a new venue for the trial. "It is physically impossible for us to attend there."

Among other cases against Mkalavishvili are two connected with the violent break-up of an ecumenical service due to have been held at Tbilisi's Central Baptist Church in Christian Unity week in January. One case concerns the break up of the service, the other relates to an incident during the mob attack when Grigori Levinets, pastor of Tbilisi's Russian-speaking Baptist congregation, was

beaten and had his camera stolen. "There is some progress in these cases," Songulashvili reported. "The investigator Mamuka Agladze has interviewed a number of witnesses, including a parliamentary deputy and Orthodox, Lutheran and Catholic clergymen."

Both Songulashvili and Ramishvili referred to speculation that the detention order might be a "game" ahead of November's parliamentary elections. Caucasus Press reported on 5 June that the parliamentary session was opened that day with an attack on the detention order by Sandro Bregadze of the Agordzineba faction. Other deputies echoed his criticism. The news agency said some deputies would be appealing to the court in Mkalavishvili's support.

"Of course we would like Mkalavishvili to be arrested," Baptist Union general secretary Merab Gaprindashvili told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 5 June. "The feeling of impunity in our society is very dangerous."

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