

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact:

Lawrence J. Goodrich, Communications Director, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom wrote October 4 to national security advisor Condoleezza Rice and Assistant Secretary of State A. Elizabeth Jones to urge that President Bush raise the issue of religious violence during his meetings today with Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze. The letters, signed by Commission Chair Michael K. Young, pointed to an "alarming increase" in such violence during the last two years, with Jehovah's Witnesses particularly targeted.

"According to human rights observers and members of religious communities, Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, and adherents of the Assemblies of God and other 'non-traditional' religious denominations have been the targets of some 80 violent attacks during this period," Chairman Young wrote.

The full text of the letters follows:

Dear Dr. Rice [Ambassador Jones]:

When President Bush meets with President Eduard Shevardnadze on Friday, October 5, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom urges him to raise the failure of the government of Georgia to address adequately an alarming increase in religious violence. The Commission recommends that President Bush urge President Shevardnadze to act decisively to end an atmosphere of impunity for those perpetrating attacks on members of religious minorities and for law enforcement officials who have refused to step in and prevent such attacks or bring perpetrators to justice.

In the last two years, members of religious minorities in Georgia have been subjected to increasing violence and harassment. Jehovah's Witnesses in particular have been targeted for such treatment, and they report that more than two dozen violent attacks and acts of harassment occurred during the period January 1 - August 16, 2001 alone. According to human rights observers and members of religious communities, Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, and adherents of the Assemblies of God and other "non-traditional" religious denominations have been the targets of some 80 violent attacks during this period. Worshipers have been seriously beaten at prayer meetings, and religious literature and other property have been destroyed. A well-known group led by Vasili Mkalavishvili, an excommunicated priest of the Georgian Orthodox Church, has openly carried out several of these attacks. Other attacks have been carried out by officials of the Georgian Orthodox Church (including priests) and, in some cases, local police.

The government of Georgia has taken some steps to address the attacks, but these appear to have been inadequate and ineffective, giving rise to the impression that those who attack or harass members of "non-traditional" faiths may do so with impunity. President Shevardnadze has condemned religious violence. In March 2001 he issued a decree instituting "special measures" to stop crimes of a religious nature and to punish those involved. Nevertheless, Georgian police have come under heavy criticism for not acting to prevent or fully investigate such attacks. No one has been charged in most of the attacks, although many of the attackers' identities are known. In some cases the victims themselves have been charged with crimes (such as hooliganism). The UN Committee Against Torture has expressed concern regarding "the failure of police to intervene and take appropriate action despite the existence of legal tools to prevent and prosecute acts of religious violence" and the lack of an effective and independent mechanism for filing complaints. Earlier this year, criminal charges were brought against Mkalavishvili, but the charges have been criticized as insufficient in light of the crimes he is known to have committed. Mkalavishvili remains free and continues to orchestrate attacks.

Georgia is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and has undertaken obligations to protect religious freedom and other human rights in agreements of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. President Shevardnadze should be urged to do more to uphold these obligations by enforcing Georgia's own laws. This includes prosecuting those responsible for religious violence and disciplining police and other officials who have participated in or have failed to take reasonable steps to prevent attacks and bring perpetrators to justice. Moreover, Georgian officials should provide equal protection of the law for all of its citizens regardless of their religion.

It is the Commission's hope that President Bush will raise these important religious freedom concerns with President Shevardnadze later this week.

Respectfully,

Michael K. Young

Chairman

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Michael K. Young

- Felice D. Gaer Firuz Kazemzadeh Richard D. Land Bishop William Francis Murphy Leila Nadya