



## United States Mission to the OSCE

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# Statement on Continuing Violence against Jehovah's Witnesses in the Republic of Georgia

Delivered by Ambassador Stephan M. Minikes to the  
Permanent Council, Vienna  
May 8, 2003

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States is deeply concerned about a shocking situation, that being the continuing violence against Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities in the Georgia. The latest episode of violence and intimidation, which was particularly shocking, involves members of the Jehovah's Witnesses and occurred in a Tbilisi courtroom on April 29th during the high-profile trial of political extremist and defrocked Orthodox priest Basili Mkalavishvili.

The Jehovah's Witnesses plaintiffs in the case were victimized all over again in a courtroom ostensibly established to provide them with justice. Despite assurances from the Government of Georgia that adequate security would be provided for the trial, Georgian police stood by and laughed as Mkalavishvili and some thirty of his followers went on a violent, prolonged rampage, physically assaulting the lawyer for the Jehovah's Witnesses, those testifying on their behalf, and observers from both the OSCE and Human Rights Watch.

Many others present in the courtroom were vilified and threatened, including a journalist from a local television station. An American diplomat and a local employee from the U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi attended the trial as observers and were forced to flee the courtroom for their own physical safety and were then harassed by the Georgian police stationed outside.

When the trial judge finally arrived in the courtroom an hour late, he joined Mkalavishvili's defense attorneys in asking irrelevant and hostile questions of the Jehovah's Witnesses plaintiffs, including about their sex lives. According to Georgian media reports, less than a week after the trial was suspended, emboldened by their successful courtroom harassment and violence, Mkalavishvili and his supporters prevented the Jehovah's Witnesses from holding a May 4 National Congress in the town of Ortasheni in eastern Georgia.

Mr. Chairman, this trial has become a travesty of justice. It damages greatly the reputation of a country that has otherwise taken pride in its religious tolerance. The physical attack on an OSCE observer is an affront to this organization that cannot be tolerated. We commend President Shevardnadze for his recent appearance at an ecumenical service and his condemnation of violence against members of religious minority groups. However, words are not enough. The Government of Georgia must accept its responsibility to its own citizens, and respect its bilateral and multilateral, including OSCE, commitments to uphold religious freedom.

We call on the Government of Georgia to investigate this trial and to take appropriate action against those involved, including the presiding judge and law enforcement officials. We further ask the Government of Georgia to take effective measures to prevent a repeat of this incident. Never again should those seeking justice from a court of law find victimization instead at the hands of that same institution.