



To: Sir Nigel Rodley
Chairperson
Human Rights Committee

Dear Mr. Rodley,

On behalf of the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Holy Church in Georgia, the Apostolic Administration of Latin Catholics of the Caucasus, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Georgia and the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia we have the honour to inform the Human Rights Committee about issues of concern for religious minorities in Georgia.

Georgia has made some formal steps, which could be characterized as those aimed at promotion of equality. However, the de-facto policies adopted and implemented by the State show that discrimination based on religious affiliation remains to be a pressing issue in our country's political agenda.

The State employs discriminatory policies towards religious minorities in the field of restitution of property confiscated during the Soviet era. As of now religious minorities, unlike the majority Orthodox Church of Georgia, have been unable to secure restitution of their properties. Georgian Orthodox Church claims ownership not only over the Orthodox churches, but also over majority of the churches, which before the confiscation by Soviet rulers, belonged to religious minorities of the country. Representatives of the Orthodox Church of Georgia, with tacit permission from the State, have "orthodoxized" and expropriated numerous Armenian Apostolic, Catholic and Lutheran churches, by changing their appearance, as well as conducting Orthodox rites in them.

Another issue of concern regards discrimination in the field of maintenance of churches. Although the State formally recognises that the country's cultural heritage comprises temples of various religious denominations, it allocates public funds only for restoration of the Orthodox churches. Moreover, it does not allow religious minorities themselves to restore their "contested" churches, which are claimed by the Orthodox Church of Georgia. It was in 2009 when due to such negligent approach, the 14th century Mughnetsots Surb Gevorg Armenian church collapsed in downtown Tbilisi, followed by the bell tower of a 17th century Surb Nshan Armenian church, which collapsed in 2012. These and similar other processes make us think that there is an orchestrated action between the State and the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church aimed at destruction of religious minorities' cultural heritage.

We are also concerned by the discriminatory attitude towards religious minorities with regards to the discussion about the reparations of damages caused by the Soviet rulers. This is a separate issue, and it does not concern restitution of property confiscated during the Soviet era. Since 2002 the Orthodox Church of Georgia has been granted more than 120 million US dollars allocated directly from the state budget. In 2014 the State adopted a decision recognising the right to reparations for some other religious organisations. By virtue of this decision, the State once again expressed its willingness to continue discriminating religious minorities, as it did not recognise equal right to reparations for all of the religious organizations in Georgia.

Furthermore, we are concerned by discrimination in the field of taxation. While the Orthodox Church is exempted from large number of taxes, other religious organisations do not benefit from the same taxation regime. This results in direct discrimination of religious minorities and we believe that it should be revised as to allow equal treatment.

Another issue of concern for us derives from the defamatory and discriminatory statements with regard to minority religious groups made by some representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church. It is

sad to acknowledge that representatives of a spiritual organization disseminate hatred and intolerance in the society and the State institutions do not devote necessary attention to this.

Hence, we would be grateful if the Human Rights Committee, upon conclusion of consideration of Georgia's fourth periodic report on implementation of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, could kindly consider a possibility of recommending to Georgian authorities:

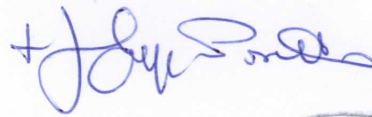
- To adopt appropriate legal basis for restitution of churches and other property of religious minorities that belonged to them before confiscation by Soviet authorities;
- To investigate all cases of transmission of minorities' belonging churches and other property to the Orthodox Church of Georgia, as well as to adopt specific measures, including but not limited to legal and raising public awareness, to secure restitution of the properties to their legitimate owners;
- To adopt policies which reflect equal attitude towards religious organizations in Georgia, including in the taxation, public education, allocation of public funds, and other spheres of public life;
- To implement specific measures aimed at denouncing hate speech from representatives of the Orthodox Church of Georgia in order, thus creating conditions where defamatory and discriminatory expressions concerning minority religious groups are eliminated.

With Blessings,

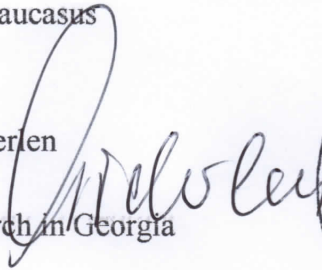
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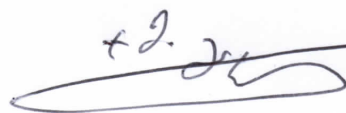


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Tbilisi, Georgia
28 June 2014



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