



NGOs joint statement in terms of ongoing religious conflict in the village Samtatskaro of Dedoplistkaro region

We would like to respond to the instances of religious conflicts that took place in the village Samtatskaro, Dedoplistkaro region for the past two weeks, when freedom of religion ensured by the Constitution of Georgia was grossly violated in terms of local Muslim residents. It should be highlighted that undersigned NGOs monitored the developments in the village Samtatskaro on May 31, therefore facts and findings submitted in this statement are underpinned by monitoring results.

On May 31, local Muslim population residing in Samtatskaro village was not allowed to say traditional Friday prayers together, which was preceded by a conflict in the entrance of the village when local orthodox Christians blocked the road and did not allow representatives of Muslim community and other individuals from Kvemo Kartli region to visit the village. Furthermore, the incident was followed by verbal abuse of representatives of Muslim community and physical abuse of Jemal Adadze, religious leader from Kvemo Kartli region. [The first incident between local Christians and Muslims took place on May 24](#), when Muslims gathered for saying prayers, were abused verbally and necessary things for religious rites were taken away from the building, while participants of the ritual were forced to leave the area. Though local police representatives attended the event, [they implemented no measures for preventing this interference in exercise of the right to freedom of religion, one of the leaders of Muslim community reports](#).

The initial tension resulted after Muslims' attempt to say joint prayers in a special meeting-house procured for them by Muslim community. Local Christians alleged that they don't object if Muslims exercise their right to religious expression in their houses, however, they will not allow Muslims to gather in a special-house for saying

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prayers there, because they are against construction of a mosque in the village. It should be noted, that Local Muslim community is willing to have a meeting-house for saying prayers with a view to exercise religious rites comprehensively, rather than to construct a mosque. We, however, should emphasize that for keeping a reasonable balance between the interests, even construction of the mosque should be treated as a legitimate demand from the side of religious minorities. It should be noted that until recently, local Muslims of Samtatskaro village used to say traditional prayers jointly in the house of one of the community members.

As regards the conflict, it is decisive to consider the role of local government and law-enforcement representatives there. During the May 31 developments at the entrance of Samtatskaro village, the police fell short to carry out any attempts for vacating the road and for curbing illegal conduct of local Orthodox Christians, let alone protection of the right of religious minorities to free movement and freedom of religion. Gamgebeli of Dedoplistkaro region, head of the local council and village envoy also witnessed the incident and they also failed to play the positive role in alleviation of the conflict and did not apply adequate measures. Furthermore, analysis of the conduct of local government and police representatives illustrates that they treated themselves as a party to the conflict and with their conduct went far beyond the scope of their competence and failed to observe the principles of religious neutrality. Namely, local authorities and police reported that they obeyed majority opinion that is against construction of the mosque there. Moreover, local government and police called on representatives of Muslim community to leave the village territory and called them provocateurs. Local government and police treated conduct of aggressive group as freedom of expression and no potential signs of offence were determined there.

Analysis of recent developments illustrate that number of local religious conflicts have emerged and instances of repression of religious minorities, especially Adjara Muslims (village Nigvziani, Tsintskaro, Tsikhisdziri) prevailed from the side of dominant religious groups in a short interval. We presume, that dissemination of religious conflict is mainly reasoned from insufficient participation of state in pre-conflict regulation process, when the state made ineffective legal response to violence revealed on the ground of religious intolerance and left the process of conflict regulation mainly to clergy. By this omission, the state failed to ensure fair regulation of the conflicts between the religious groups that are even in unequal positions. In

addition, by moving the conflict regulation process away from the secular space, the state failed to create the neutral public field and to carry out policy based on rule of law and human rights respect.

Furthermore, general state policy (frequent omissions, inadequate conduct, or unequal treatment of religious organizations) may be recognized as stimulating factors for religious conflicts. It is obvious, that public fields are under the influence of indoctrination which inhibits establishment of democratic and tolerance based values in civil society.

In view of this, as regards Samtatskaro conflict, it is decisive to have adequate state response that implies peaceful, fair resolution of conflicts and implementation of all possible measures for ensuring comprehensive exercise of the right to freedom of religion. To this effect, it is especially important that:

-The state made adequate response to the conduct of individuals, who went beyond the scope of the law and restricted freedom of religion of other individuals. Conduct of some persons contains clear signs of offence, which requires effective investigation and imposition of legal responsibility on them. Furthermore, the state should react on local government and police conduct, which failed to observe religious neutrality and did nothing to ensure exercise of freedom of religion by minority groups.

-Local government representatives adequately realized their role and brought their conduct in line with established by the law and rule of law principles;

-state supported openly importance of comprehensive implementation of religious practice for religious minorities and applied effective measures for ensuring freedom of expression of Muslim population;

-state supported negotiation between the contending religious groups, based on the principles of respect of peace and freedom of religion;

-state reinforced tolerance based policy, especially in education system, in communities with mixed religions.

We believe that for the next Friday, the state will take adequate measures for

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ensuring safe and peaceful environment for local Muslims while saying their traditional prayers. In addition, we hope that the state will work out common policy for regulation of problems in religious conflict prone areas and will promote establishment of peaceful and tolerant environment there.

NGOs will continue monitoring of the developments in Samtatskaro village and will submit their findings to public.

*Human Rights Training and Monitoring Center
Georgia's Democracy Initiative
Georgian Young Lawyers' Association
Article 42 of the Constitution*