

1 October 2012

საქართველოში სომეხთა სამოციქულო
წმიდა მართლმადიდებელი ეკლესიის
კულტურულ-საგანმანათლებლო და
ახალგაზრდული ცენტრი „ჰაიარტუნ“

ՀԱՅ ԱՌԱՔԵԼԱԿԱՆ ՈՒՂԱՓԱՆ ՍՈՒՐԲ
ԵԿԵՂԵՑՈՒ ՎԻՐԱՀԱՅՈՑ ԹԵՄԻ ՄԵՏԱՎՈՒԹՅՈՒ
ԿՐԹՈՒԹՅԱՆ և ԵՐԻՏԱՍԱՐԴՈՒԹՅԱՆ
«ՀԱՅԱՐՏՈՒՆ» ԿԵՆՏՐՈՆ



CULTURAL, EDUCATIONAL AND YOUTH CENTRE "HAYARTUN" AT THE DIOCESE OF ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC ORTHODOX HOLY CHURCH IN GEORGIA

Վրաստան, Թբილისი, 0103 Արմაզի ქ. №18 / საქართველო, თბილისი, 0103, არმაზის ქ. №18 / 18 Armazi Street, 0103, Tbilisi, Georgia
Tel.: +995 32 2546411 / Fax: +995 32 2751790 / Email: hayartun@hotmail.com

Mr. Chairperson,

Distinguished Members of the Delegations,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is Levon Isakhanyan, and I am Georgian of Armenian origin. The Armenian community of Georgia constitutes the third largest community with approximately 250 000 members. Being Armenian in Georgia means being an ethnic, linguistic and religious minority. The Government of Georgia has made some steps to improve the conditions of minority groups, including those of religious minorities, however significant gaps still remain to be filled.

In virtue of the amendment to the Civil Code adopted by the Georgian Parliament in July 2011 religious minorities now have the possibility of registration as religious organisations. The Diocese of Armenian Apostolic Church in Georgia used this opportunity and registered as a religious organisation. However, even after their official registration as legal entities of public law, the Armenian Church, as well as a number of other religious organisations in Georgia, have been unable to secure restitution of property confiscated during the Soviet Period. Moreover, due to the negligence from the State institutions in 2009 the Mughnetsots Surb Gevorg Armenian Church built in 1356 collapsed in the center of Tbilisi. This incident was reflected in the Report on Country Visit to Georgia, prepared by Mr. Mario Mauro, former Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination. Mr. Mauro mentioned that “[t]he Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic Churches have reportedly been unable to secure the return of their churches and other facilities that were closed during the Soviet period, many of which later were reportedly given *de facto* to the Georgian Orthodox Church by the government. This problem affects in particular the Armenian Apostolic Church, whose representatives mentioned the demolition of St. George Church in Tbilisi as an example of a cultural and historical loss for the community.”¹ Another loss for the Armenian community which occurred in May 2012, after the official registration of the Armenian Church, was the bell tower of the Surb Nshan Armenian church built in 1703, which is situated in the historical centre of Tbilisi.

The Georgian Government has to demonstrate it is taking necessary measures to ensure restitution of property confiscated from religious minorities during the Soviet period to the legitimate owners. I would like to stress that the Georgian State has already returned the property of the Georgian Orthodox Church, but has equally tolerated the unlawful appropriation of a

¹ See OSCE Document CIO.GAL/137/10, Report of Mario Mauro, Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, *Country Visit to Georgia*, 28 July 2010, p. 3.

number of Armenian Apostolic Churches in Georgia by the Georgian Orthodox Church. The Armenian Apostolic Church is specifically claiming restitution of 6 historical Armenian churches. The Patriarchy of the Georgian Orthodox Church has claimed these churches are disputed, despite clear evidence of their Armenian origin. This affects not just the Armenian Apostolic Church, but also other religious minorities who are claiming restitution of property confiscated during the Soviet period.

We believe that selective approach of the Government towards issue of restitution of confiscated property contradicts principles of equality and non-discrimination, incorporated within the Georgia's Human Dimension commitments.

Another issue of concern regards discrimination in the field of State financing of religious organisations. Although the equality and non-discrimination have been included among the fundamental provisions of the Georgian Constitution, only the Georgian Orthodox Church receives state finances from the budget, which is being formed *inter alia* by the tax payers who do not belong to the parish of the Georgian Church. In order to meet requirements of the Human Dimension commitments the Government of Georgia has to provide official finances to all religious organisations proportionally.

In conclusion I would like to recommend to the Georgian Government:

- to return the property of the Armenian Church and of other religious minorities, confiscated during the Soviet period;
- adopt equal attitude towards religious denominations in the country.

Thank you for your attention!