

**LATEST NEWS # 340, February 8, 2006**

**The following news concerns Georgia.**

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## Fuel crisis brings suffering to Georgia

**GEORGIA** — “Your prayerful support is still extremely important to us,” writes Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Baptist Church and General Secretary of the United Bible Societies Representation in Georgia. His message to his supporters in various countries comes as the people of Tbilisi slowly emerge from a time of great suffering. During the worst winter for many decades, with temperatures dropping to minus 20C, they have endured days on end without power after explosions severed a gas pipeline from Russia and bad weather damaged power lines.



Gas supplies have now been restored to some parts of the city, but some districts are still without power. “I have visited many people who have nothing to warm themselves with and I have seen their desperate situation,” says Bishop Malkhaz.

The fate of the elderly residents of the Betheli Centre run by the Evangelical Baptist Church on the outskirts of Tbilisi has been a particular concern for Bishop Malkhaz during this worrying time. Thanks to the “courage and creativity of the entire community”, though, they came through the crisis and even managed to help others in greater need. One day in the depths of the power cut, he writes, he went to the centre early in the morning but could not get through the gates because they were blocked by a flock of sheep and goats. The freezing conditions had made it impossible for the shepherd to feed the animals properly out in the fields, so he was now bringing them into the city in the hope of finding some grass for them in a park. Once inside the centre, Bishop Malkhaz spoke to the staff and they agreed to find some hay for the flock.

“Very soon we were joined by some of the elderly people who were courageous enough to venture outside for the first time since the crisis began. They greatly enjoyed the company of the ‘guests’ and were generous enough to share some food with the sheepdog.”

Even though they are now coming to an end, the power crisis and the severe weather have left “dreadful consequences.” In particular, many elderly people have suffered broken bones as a result of falling on icy roads. One such victim was the Rev Meliton Khechuashvili. Even at the age of 83, he continued to pray daily at the Cathedral Baptist Church. On one journey there, though, he fell and broke his hip. After an operation to repair the damage, he is now being cared for, along with his frail wife, at the Betheli Centre. “He is fortunate to be there,” says Bishop Malkhaz, “but there are many people who have no access to medical treatment or to human care.”

Reflecting on the last few years, Bishop Malkhaz concludes that they have been “very difficult”. However, “your support, letters, phone calls and not least your prayers have kept me going and inspired me to work and be an inspiration for others. You help me and my colleagues to help the most vulnerable in society.” (510 words – GEORGIA.08.02.06)

*Photo (low resolution): Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili with a sheep that was fed at the Betheli Centre. Tbilisi, Georgia.*

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