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BELARUS: Baptist fined for church family holiday

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

A state official has defended as lenient a fine of almost two weeks' average wages imposed on the Baptist Viktor Orekhov for organising a church summer holiday. "What European country would tolerate a group of people doing what they like, completely ignoring the state and law, not responding to the authorities' comments?" religious affairs official Vasili Marchenko told Forum 18 News Service. Baptists in the south-western Brest Region were denied permission to rent leisure facilities they had used in earlier years. After they went ahead in June with a camp on private land, police invaded the camp to question the children and threatened to close it by force. Orekhov was fined on 24 August for the creation or leadership of a religious organisation without state registration. "We are to blame, it seems, for being believers," Orekhov pointed out. "This is why I was prosecuted and fined." This is the first significant fine in over a year to be handed down to a member of the Baptist Council of Churches in Belarus. In July an ideology official tried to break up a charismatic church's summer camp.

A Baptist in the south-western region of Brest has been fined 124,000 Belarusian Roubles (325 Norwegian Kroner, 42 Euros or 58 US Dollars) – almost two weeks' average wages - for organising a church summer holiday. Forum 18 News Service notes that this is the first significant fine in over a year to be handed down to a member of the Baptist Council of Churches in Belarus.

Brest region's top religious affairs official, Vasili Marchenko, suggested to Forum 18 on 13 September that the fine was lenient. "What European country would tolerate a group of people doing what they like, completely ignoring the state and law, not responding to the authorities' comments? Any country would punish them, and severely."

Viktor Orekhov was fined by an administrative court in Brest district on 24 August, the Baptist Council of Churches reported on 8 September. It said the case had been brought on the basis of a 7 July protocol drawn up by the chairman of Mukhavets village council. In protesting against the decision, Orekhov wrote that he had not formed a religious organisation in the nearby village of Semisosny. Instead, "parents and children from various places gathered for fellowship and relaxation on private land belonging to believers. We are to blame, it seems, for being believers. This is why I was prosecuted and fined."

Reached by Forum 18 on 12 September, Orekhov declined to add to the information already issued by the Council of Churches.

Marchenko, the religious affairs official, told Forum 18 that Orekhov was prosecuted under the article in the Administrative Violations Code punishing the creation or leadership of a religious organisation without state registration. He was unable to identify it more precisely, however. In the revised version of the Administrative Violations Code, approved on 31 December 2006 and in force since 1 March 2007, the relevant article is 9.9, part 1.

The 2002 Religion Law also demands state registration for all religious communities. Among its many restrictions is a limitation of religious activity to the location where a community is registered (see F18News 13 October 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=162).

The Brest Baptists took their holiday in Semisosny village after being refused rental of leisure camp facilities used in earlier years, the Council of Churches reported on 30 June. Every day from 23 to 29 June, it maintained, hygiene, ecology, forestry, youth affairs and other state officials checked up on the families. On 29 June three church representatives, including Orekhov, met with Brest's regional police chief, Andrei Pronevich. He reportedly demanded that the children leave Semisosny and threatened the use of force if the Baptists continued their holiday.

On the evening of 29 June, the Baptists reported, Pronevich led a group of police onto private land where the Baptist families were holidaying. Two officers interrogated children without parental consent, they complained, while a third filmed proceedings. Despite police threats and intimidation, the Baptists noted that the holiday was not broken up.

Marchenko, the religious affairs official, insisted to Forum 18 that the authorities had no option but to respond to the Baptists in the way that they did. "What can you do with such people? They were given a chance to put everything right, but they violated everything it is possible to violate." Explaining that "a whole procedure" exists for holding a children's holiday camp, the religious affairs official referred to requirements for its location and the provision of "clean air, sun, nature – everything necessary for a

normal, OK holiday." Strict fire regulations and hygiene standards also apply, he added, "so that none of the kiddies gets food poisoning." It is the state's responsibility, he insisted, "to ensure the provision of such a holiday."

When Forum 18 suggested that the Baptists had not held a children's camp but been on a family holiday, Marchenko accused them of being "cunning and deceiving". "They said it was just a family holiday, but we know it wasn't. The children there were part of an educational camp." While the number of participants fluctuated, he estimated that there were 50 on average.

The Baptist Council of Churches broke away from the government-recognised Baptist Union in 1961 in protest at Soviet regulations preventing missionary activity and religious instruction to children. It refuses on principle to register with the authorities in post-Soviet countries.

"The problem is that their principle is to ignore everything to do with the state," Marchenko complained to Forum 18. From a human point of view, this was "inexplicable psychology", he suggested. "In doing this they take a great sin onto their souls, although they claim to be serving God." In a 2005 report, Marchenko berated the low prosecution rate of local unregistered Baptist congregations (see F18News 18 November 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=691).

Orekhov has already been prosecuted for leading unregistered worship. In November 2005 he was fined 145,000 Belarusian Roubles (432 Norwegian Kroner, 54 Euros or 65 US Dollars) (see F18News 15 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=705). This was followed in June 2006 by a further fine of 155,000 Belarusian Roubles (448 Norwegian Kroner, 57 Euros or 72 US Dollars). "Why are we being forced to register on terms which allow the authorities to interfere in internal church life?" he wrote in response to the second fine. "The Bible says that it is a sin."

Up until 2004, fines for unregistered religious activity were usually relatively low – equivalent to several days' average wages – and for the most part encountered by congregations of the Baptist Council of Churches. They and other unregistered independent Protestant churches reported 17 such fines in 2003 to 2004. While the analogous figure for 2005 to 2006 is 12, those fines were on several occasions significantly higher – ranging from the equivalent of two weeks' to two months' average wages. The average monthly wage in Belarus is approximately 300,000 Belarusian Roubles (800 Norwegian Kroner, 100 Euros or 140 US dollars).

In July, an Ideology Department official in Minsk Region tried to break up a family holiday camp for members of the Minsk-based charismatic Jesus Christ Church (see F18News 17 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=995). In disruption to a similar holiday camp in Smorgon District (Grodno [Hrodna] Region) in 2006, soldiers deported families from a number of Minsk charismatic churches back to the capital (see F18News 17 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=832). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=888.

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>

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