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BELARUS: Danes deported for praying in church

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Two Danish visitors to Belarus were detained by police and are being deported as they expressed "ideas of a religious nature", in the words of the deportation order, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "We were praying, reading and speaking from the Bible, greeting the people, and praying together," one of the two, Erling Laursen, told Forum 18. Neither were leading the worship service they attended. Police took video footage of the two praying in Gomel's charismatic Living Faith Church, but refused to say who had recorded it "to protect our colleague". The Church's pastor Dmitry Podlobko told Forum 18 that a young man he had never seen before filmed a worship service with his mobile phone. Pastor Podlobko said that "it's not news to us that the security organs are watching. They visit and watch us secretly." The KGB secret police closely monitors all religious communities. The deportation of the two Danes – who are banned from Belarus for one year – brings to 31 the number of foreign citizens barred from Belarus in recent years for their religious activity. The most recent people expelled were four Catholic priests and three nuns, banned at the end of 2008.

Two Danish citizens, Erling Laursen and Rolf Bergen, face deportation for taking part in worship services in Gomel's [Homyel] charismatic Living Faith Church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Neither of the two led the services. "We were reading and speaking from the Bible, greeting the people, and praying together. Then the police came and took us to the police station," Laursen told Forum 18 from Gomel in south-eastern Belarus on 10 February. "They said we broke the law because we were spreading religious ideas."

Bergen's 7 February deportation order, which Forum 18 has seen, states that he expressed "ideas of a religious nature," although not invited to Belarus to conduct religious activity. While this is said to be in violation of the restrictive 2002 Religion Law, no article of the Law is cited.

These deportations bring to 31 the number of foreign citizens barred from Belarus in recent years because of their religious activity. At the end of 2008, four Polish Catholic priests and three nuns had their permission to continue religious work in the country revoked (see F18News 7 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1237).

"Believers of other European countries can visit each other freely, pray with each other, support each other," Living Faith's pastor, Dmitry Podlobko, commented to Forum 18 on 9 February. "Belarusian churches need this very much."

The two Danes have been barred from Belarus for one year. Bergen has chosen to leave today (11 February); Laursen may stay until 19 February.

Following Living Faith's Saturday evening service on 7 February, a local police officer, migration official, and interpreter entered the church, lawyer Sergei Lukanin of its sister congregation in Minsk, New Life, told Forum 18 on 9 February. Subsequently detained at Gomel's Soviet District police station until approximately 1am, the Danes were questioned by police officers Andrei Smalyuga and Vyacheslav Yunchits.

At the police station, the Danes were shown "evidence" of their illegal activity, Lukanin told Forum 18: a brief video recording made with a mobile telephone of Laursen praying with another congregation member. Officers maintained that they also had a witness statement against Bergen, the lawyer added, but would not reveal the identity of either the witness or the person who made the video recording "to protect our colleague."

Police officer Andrei Smalyuga confirmed his name, but then said he could not hear and put the phone down after Forum 18's introduction and first question regarding the Danes on 11 February. He did not answer when Forum 18 rang again shortly afterwards.

Policeman Vyacheslav Yunchits told Forum 18 nervously that he was "unable to speak (..) in a meeting (..) with a full schedule (..) so busy right now," when contacted on 11 February. He was unable to suggest a convenient time to talk.

"I didn't take the decision – it was the police," Nikolai Maly, an assistant head of Soviet District Executive Committee, stressed to

Forum 18 on 11 February. The two Danes had violated the law by not obtaining permission from regional religious affairs officials to conduct religious activity, he said. When Forum 18 suggested they had simply been praying with other church members, Maly maintained there was a recording of them giving a lecture.

Asked why state permission was required for this, Maly said he was unfamiliar with the relevant part of the law, as it was not his area. "I can't say if it is good or bad, but the law is the law, in any country, and you have to follow it," he remarked. This was also his answer when Forum 18 pointed out that foreign citizens do not require state permission to conduct religious activity in other European countries. "When my son was in England, he followed the law," Maly added. "And in any country, the law on the residency of foreign citizens is sacred."

Maly directed Forum 18 to the regional Council for Religious Affairs for further comment, but its telephone went unanswered on 11 February.

The two Danes were also among the 70-strong congregation at Living Faith's 6 February Friday evening service, Pastor Podlobko told Forum 18. "I was on the platform and invited people to pray," he recalled. When the congregation started praying together, the pastor was bothered to see "someone raise a mobile phone – I'd never seen the young man before." The film shown as evidence by police was taken from the spot where this man was standing, Podlobko told Forum 18.

The young man later said he was a student visiting the church for the first time and would come the following day, the pastor said. State officials entered the church after the Saturday service immediately after the young man left, he added. "I don't know what he was, KGB or what. But it's not news to us that the security organs are watching. They visit and watch us secretly."

The Danes' association with Belarus dates to the mid-1990s, when they started organising humanitarian aid through a church charity, Laursen told Forum 18. Although they no longer do this as it has become impossibly bureaucratic and expensive, the pair visit their many friends in Gomel three or four times a year, he said. Members of Word of Faith church in Brande, Denmark, Laursen and Bergen attend Pastor Podlobko's church when in Gomel. Their 6 and 7 February visits to the church were the first during their latest stay in the city.

The property of Pastor Podlobko, the building where Living Faith has met for approximately six years is its registered address but not legally a house of worship. As is the case for many Protestant churches in Belarus, its designation as a house of worship would require a transfer from residential housing stock, which is practically impossible (see F18News 30 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=966). By law, every religious meeting outside a house of worship requires state permission, but this is impractical to obtain, Pastor Podlobko told Forum 18.

While the state authorities never bothered the pastor about this before, he was summoned to Soviet District Public Prosecutor's Office in October 2007 and told the church's meetings were "illegal" (see F18News 11 October 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1033). "But we aren't doing anything illegal, we're praying and reading the Bible," the pastor remarked. "In our country, if you have a few people coming to your home and meeting to read the Bible regularly that's illegal. But it is God-given right, and we'll pray, preach and open churches even if the authorities don't allow it, because Jesus Christ told us to."

Living Faith's legal position is similar to that of Minsk's New Life Church (see most recently F18News 26 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1244). Like New Life, Living Faith has nowhere else to meet as it has been refused access to rented premises in Gomel, according to Pastor Podlobko.

Belarus places severe restrictions on foreign religious workers. They require special state permission to conduct religious work in addition to valid visas, may operate only inside designated houses of worship and must attest knowledge of Belarus' state languages, Belarusian and Russian (see F18News 20 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1090).

No one at the curia of Minsk-Mohilov Catholic Archdiocese was available for comment on 11 February about the recently expelled priests and nuns. The Catholic Church has been attempting to have the expulsions reversed (see F18News 7 January 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1237).

Religious communities understand that the KGB secret police keeps a close eye on their activity. KGB officers clearly had inside knowledge when they apprehended two US citizens for religious activity in a Baptist church in Ratomka (Minsk Region) in 2004 (see F18News 12 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=560). Similarly, a parishioner noted that the two people in plain clothes who informed a Polish priest that he was breaking the law by leading Mass without state permission in Minsk in 2006 "are always sitting in our church" (see F18News 22 October 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1207). (END)

For a personal commentary by Antoni Bokun, Pastor of a Pentecostal Church in Minsk, on Belarusian citizens' struggle to reclaim their history as a land of religious freedom, see F18News 22 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1131.

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

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>.

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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