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BELARUS: Ideology official targets rehabilitation programme

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

A Belarusian Christian rehabilitation programme for alcoholics and drug addicts run by a registered social organisation, Cliff House, has been targeted by an ideology official, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Irina Batishcheva, head of a district Ideology Department in Mogilev, has twice led police raids on Cliff House sessions escorted by police, most recently when five participants were singing Christian songs before drinking tea. "Some people got afraid after the first police visit and stopped coming," Cliff House's co-ordinator, Lyudmila Batyuk, told Forum 18. A local court has so far refused to prosecute Batyuk for leading an unregistered religious organisation. Asked by Forum 18 about her visits to Cliff House, Batishcheva insisted, "I will not comment on my actions." Belarus tries to enforce strict segregation of religious and social activity, with religious believers complaining to Forum 18 that they are barred from speaking publicly on general social issues.

A rehabilitation programme for alcoholics and drug addicts run by a Belarusian Christian social organisation, Cliff House, has become the target of an ideology official in the eastern city of Mogilev [Mahilyow], Forum 18 News Service has learnt. "Some people got afraid after the first police visit and stopped coming," the programme's co-ordinator, Lyudmila Batyuk, told Forum 18 from Mogilev on 23 March.

Belarus tries to enforce strict segregation of religious and social activity. Religious believers have complained to Forum 18 that they are barred from speaking publicly on general social issues (see F18News 3 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=736). One Polish Catholic priest thinks he was expelled from Belarus partly due to his involvement in alcohol rehabilitation programmes (see F18News 12 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=899). Another was apparently expelled because he made public comments on Belarusian social problems when in Poland (see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1058).

Irina Batishcheva, the head of October District Executive Committee's Ideology Department in Mogilev, interrupted an 11 March Cliff House session at a private house in the city, Batyuk told Forum 18. Its five participants were singing Christian songs and were just about to drink tea: "We always sing as it raises people's spirits." The state representatives questioned those present and noted down the songs' lyrics, as well as several titles of religious books in the room, said Batyuk; "books I read but don't use in consultations."

Stressing that she wished to be law-abiding, Batyuk then asked Batishcheva what offence she had committed. The ideology official maintained she was conducting unregistered religious activity, the Cliff House representative told Forum 18. Under the restrictive 2002 Religion Law, religious communities must register with the state.

The 11 March incident came after October District Court rejected as incomplete prosecution materials relating to a similar raid on 28 January. On that occasion Batishcheva, another official and two police officers explained they were responding to a complaint about "a sect doing unregistered religious activity," Batyuk told Forum 18. The ten participants in that session were then taken to a local police station for questioning.

"I will not comment on my actions," Irina Batishcheva insisted when asked by Forum 18 on 25 March why she had made the visits to Cliff House. Asked further questions, the ideology official simply repeated this response.

Registered as a social organisation in Minsk in 2006, Cliff House's aims include "the affirmation of traditional Christian moral norms in personal, family and public life." While its charter activity extends across Belarus, the organisation currently operates in some eight cities.

During the two years since Cliff House's programme began in Mogilev, some 10 to 15 people have fully recovered from addictions, Batyuk told Forum 18. Participants meet at a private house in the city belonging to Batyuk, as her organisation cannot afford to rent premises. While not fully constructed, the first floor is complete except for central heating, she said.

Cliff House follows a ten-step rehabilitation programme for alcoholics and drug addicts similar to the Twelve-step Programme devised by Alcoholics Anonymous. Instead of a non-specific deity as the facilitator of recovery, however, "we speak about the

importance of Jesus and how only He can help," Batyuk explained to Forum 18. The programme was devised by a rehabilitation centre attached to the large Kiev-based charismatic Embassy of God Church, of which Batyuk is a member.

A supporter of the 2004 Ukrainian Orange Revolution, Embassy of God's Nigerian pastor, Sunday Adelaja, was barred from Russia in 2006 (see F18News 7 June 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=794). A church representative has maintained to Forum 18 that Pastor Adelaja is not barred from Belarus, although he has not visited in recent years (see F18News 18 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=856).

Embassy of God members in Belarus have transferred the public expression of their faith to the social sphere as the authorities refuse to register their churches, Batyuk told Forum 18.

While seven Embassy of God churches - including those in Brest, Gomel [Homyel], Minsk, Rechitsa [Rechytsa] (Gomel Region), Slonim and Soligorsk - managed to re-register under the 2002 Law, a further eight formed since the Law came into force have been unable to register, their co-ordinator Natalya Komovskaya confirmed to Forum 18 from the south-eastern regional centre of Gomel [Homyel] on 25 March (see F18News 28 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=619).

Unregistered religious communities may encounter state harassment, increasingly by officials in charge of enforcing ideology. In the latest, 20 March incident, an ideology official in Bobruisk (Mogilev Region) told a local Embassy of God pastor who unsuccessfully sought registration that his community would have "big problems" if it continued to meet for worship, according to Komovskaya (see F18News 26 March 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1273).

Also on 20 March, six Baptists who were singing hymns and offering Christian books to passers-by in the western town of Shchuchin in Grodno [Hrodna] Region were detained by police, local Baptists told Forum 18 on 29 March. "People were listening to the singing with pleasure and took the Word of God as a gift," they said. "The joy of the spiritual work was destroyed by the arrival of a unit of the police." They said a police inspector ordered them to put away the small table and books immediately and come with them to the police station.

Police drew up records on all six men and confiscated all the Christian literature. "They gave them copies of the records and the record on the confiscation of the literature," the Baptists noted, "but didn't say if they'll be returned after they're examined. The reason for all this was that the church is not registered." The Baptists, who were then freed, belong to the Baptist Council of Churches, whose congregations refuse on principle to seek state registration. (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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