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BELARUS: Authorities prepare again to expel New Life church from its own building

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Members of the New Life Full Gospel congregation in the capital Minsk refused to accept the latest official demands to give up the place of worship they bought back in 2002, the church's lawyer Sergei Lukanin told Forum 18 News Service. Court executors delivered an order to vacate the building by 20 August, but church members have held a series of prayer meetings to defend their building. The KGB secret police referred all Forum 18's questions to Minsk City Executive Committee, refusing to respond to church claims that it is behind moves to expel it from its place of worship. Alla Ryabitseva, senior religious affairs official at the Minsk Executive Committee, put the phone down when Forum 18 tried to find out why the church has been ordered to leave. European Union ambassadors in Minsk are due to hear the church leaders' concerns on 25 August.

Members of the New Life Full Gospel Church in the Moscow District of the capital Minsk have insisted to Forum 18 News Service they will not voluntarily abandon the worship building they bought back in 2002. They say the church has the full right to the building and reject the court-ordered expulsion, which should have taken place by 20 August. "We're not afraid and are not under pressure," the church's lawyer Sergei Lukanin told Forum 18 from the church building on 24 August. "We're here praying and believe God will protect us." He rejected claims on state-run television that church members believe the authorities will send in bulldozers against them. "As a lawyer I believe the state could do anything, including the use of force. But as a believer I rely on God."

Officials have refused to explain why they will not let the church remain in its place of worship, why they have repeatedly refused the church's application to have the building redesignated as a place of worship and why the church's applications for registration as a religious organisation have been rejected three times since re-registration was required with the 2002 Religion Law.

Lukanin stressed that whether or not the church is thrown out of its building, it will continue to meet for worship. "It is a necessity of our faith," he told Forum 18.

The moves against the New Life Church come as religious communities in other parts of Belarus face continuing tight restrictions on their activities and fines for violating these restrictions. Two Protestant churches in the western town of Baranovichi have been fined since the beginning of July (see F18News 25 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1340).

The latest expulsion threats

On 13 August, two court executors visited the church and tried to deliver an order to vacate their building within seven days in accordance with a Higher Economic Court decision from January 2009. However, church members refused to let them in.

The document – of which Forum 18 has seen a copy - was handed over on 14 August. It gave the church until 20 August to leave and informed church members that 37,581,476 Belarusian Roubles (79,924 Norwegian Kroner, 9,290 Euros or 13,300 US Dollars) was being sent in compensation. Church members insist this is far below the current market value of the building and have returned the funds, the third time they have done so.

The court executors followed up with a 21 August document – delivered to the home address of Lukanin's parents the following day and also seen by Forum 18 – instructing the church to hand over the building and unilaterally declaring that the building had been transferred to the Minsk Property Agency.

In response to the moves to seize the building, church members began a series of prayer and fasting meetings on 17 August which seem set to continue. "Several dozen church members are here at this moment praying," Lukanin told Forum 18. Several hundred people – many from other Protestant churches across Belarus – came to the earlier prayer meetings to show solidarity with church members.

On 18 August, the church's Pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, wrote to Presidential Administration Head of Ideology Natalya

Petkevich, asking for her help for church members to enjoy their Constitutional right to religious freedom. Lukanin, the church's lawyer, told Forum 18 that no reply had been received by 24 August.

Fifty Protestant pastors from across Belarus signed a letter to President Aleksandr Lukashenko on 20 August expressing their support for the church and complaining of continuing tight restrictions on religious communities which prevent many Protestant congregations from renting, buying or building places of worship (see F18News 25 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1340).

Anna Ekberg, Deputy Head of Mission of the Swedish Embassy in Minsk, told Forum 18 that the Embassy has invited church leaders to join the regular meeting of European Union ambassadors at the French Embassy on 25 August. "We've been following the New Life Church case and the situation has become more pressing recently," she told Forum 18 from Minsk on 24 August. "We have invited the church leaders to give their view of the situation. We will also get information from the Belarusian authorities. We try to listen to all views."

Long campaign against New Life Church

Purchased in 2002, New Life's building - a spacious, modern barn-like structure on the edge of Minsk - is legally still a cowshed. The state authorities refuse to allow the church to legalise its position by changing the building's designation to a house of worship, or to use it for services. The congregation's defiant worship at the building has resulted in multiple large fines in addition to its formal confiscation. The congregation has nowhere else to meet, having earlier been barred from public facilities by district administrations throughout Minsk. It even toyed with the idea of keeping several cows at the church in order to nominally legitimise its position - but animal husbandry is now banned in Minsk.

New Life's stand-off with the state came to a head in October 2006, when the church exhausted the appeals procedure against a 17 August 2005 municipal instruction curtailing its land rights and ordering the sale of its building. The Minsk authorities dispatched a bulldozer with the apparent intention of demolishing the church. Congregation members and well-wishers embarked on a high-profile hunger strike in its defence.

After letters of support from all over the world began pouring in to President Lukashenko, Pastor Goncharenko was invited to see a top-ranking Presidential Administration official, Oleg Proleskovsky, who hinted that a legal resolution was possible. This was the reason New Life returned to the courts in December 2006. After more than two years of delays, however, the Higher Economic Court threw out its appeal on 13 January 2009, returning the church's battle to the beginning.

It is now evident that the Presidential Administration was simply looking to buy time. The Minsk authorities then demanded that New Life vacate its building by 1 June 2009, the latest excuse given being that a kindergarten is planned for the site – even though there is a suitable vacant plot of land next to the church. When the 1 June deadline expired, more than 500 church members and Christians from across Belarus came to the church resolved not to give up the building they had bought and restored with their own funds, time and hard work (see F18News 11 June 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1310).

Who is behind the threatened expulsion of New Life church?

Lukanin believes that the KGB secret police is behind the long-running state campaign to oust the church from its property. "We believe the KGB is behind all this." He told Forum 18 that water board officials checking up on whether the building has been illegally connected to the water supply told church members privately that they had received a letter from the KGB instructing them to take action against the church. He said church members have not seen the alleged letter and said church members are not aware that KGB officers have visited the church.

The duty officer at Minsk city and regional KGB – who would not give his name - refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 24 August or to put Forum 18 through to any officer who could do so. Asked for contact details of the head of Moscow District KGB, the duty officer responded: "He won't talk to you." However, after extensive consultation with colleagues, the duty officer insisted: "It is not we who are dealing with this – it's the city Executive Committee." Asked repeatedly whether the KGB was behind the moves to oust the New Life Church from its place of worship, he repeatedly responded: "No comment."

State religious affairs officials would not comment or were unavailable for comment on 24 August. The assistant to Leonid Gulyako, Plenipotentiary for Religious and Ethnic Affairs, told Forum 18 that her boss was "in an urgent meeting on an ongoing issue", but denied that the meeting was about the New Life Church. She insisted that "this is not a question for Leonid Gulyako" but for the Minsk city religious affairs official Alla Ryabitseva. "The church can keep cows but cannot pray there," she said. "The state treats all religious organisations the same and supports all at state level, provided they obey the law. If they break the law they will be punished."

On 15 July Gulyako had told a press conference that he supported moves to confiscate the church building.

Reached on 24 August, Ryabitseva put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 had introduced itself and asked about the New Life

Church.

Equally unwilling to explain why the church cannot retain and use for worship a building it bought with its own funds was Galina Kovalenko, head of the Ideology Department of Minsk's Moscow District Executive Committee. Like other officials, she claimed that the decision to expel the church merely reflects the implementation of the Law. "All is being done in accordance with the law," she told Forum 18 on 24 August, before putting the phone down.

Igor Kudrevich, First Deputy Head of Moscow District Executive Committee, also insisted all is being done in accordance with the Law. But he told Forum 18 his administration has "no role" in the issue. "It is not within our competence." (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=1311.

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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