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RUSSIA: Moscow Baptist street service broken up

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

After police broke up an open air Baptist evangelistic service in southern Moscow, a court ruled on 11 August that the singing and praying "disturbed public order and the peace of those relaxing nearby". One Baptist was fined 16 US dollars after police claim he swore at them, a charge denied by local Baptists. "Believers don't swear," Veniamin Khorev told Forum 18 News Service. He described the breaking up of the service as "part of the normal life of our church". As the Baptists refuse to register with the authorities they have no legal status and in practice cannot rent buildings for worship. Their evangelistic events have been disrupted across Russia this summer, with books confiscated, tents taken down, six church members detained for five days and four fined.

Baptists singing and praying in a Moscow courtyard "disturbed public order and the peace of those relaxing nearby," a local municipal court ruled on 11 August. The court fined one of the Baptists 500 roubles (125 Norwegian kroner, 15 Euros or 16 US dollars) for allegedly using expletives while being ushered into a police car as officers broke up the 26 July gathering. A member of the congregation based in the Moscow district where the meeting was broken up categorically denied that the Baptist who had been fined had in fact sworn. "Believers don't swear," Veniamin Khorev told Forum 18 News Service in Moscow on 25 August. He added that the accused has refused to pay the fine, and the congregation has formally appealed to Moscow City Council, with no response so far.

According to a 16 August statement from the Baptist Council of Churches, the group met at the location in southern Moscow on 26 July for an evangelistic service. Asked to disperse by police soon after beginning worship, they refused, "citing the Biblical command to go out and preach about God's salvation."

The Council of Churches is the ruling body of the International Union of Baptist Churches, which broke away from the mainstream Baptist Union over issues of co-operation with the atheist Soviet state in 1961. The Union continues to adhere to a rigid principle of separation of church and state, according to which none of its current 3,705 congregations throughout the former Soviet Union are registered.

Khorev maintained that Russia's 1997 law on religion gives even an unregistered religious group such as his own the right to gather in any public place. State officials, on the other hand, maintain that a gathering of ten or more persons constitutes a picket, he explained, for which the organisers must inform the local authorities in advance. Since the Baptists' aims are not political, "we argue that we are not a picket," he said.

Forum 18 notes that, under Article 16 of the 1997 law, religious gatherings in open public spaces must take place in accordance with a 1992 presidential decree, which rules that mass meetings, street processions, demonstrations and pickets may take place freely provided that the relevant local authority has been given advance warning.

Konstantin Blazhenov, vice-chairman of Moscow City Council's Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations, told Forum 18 on 27 August that he was not aware of the 26 July incident, and was thus unable to comment on it. But he maintained that mass gatherings of any kind "must be registered with the authorities". This, he confirmed, meant informing the state authorities in advance of the event.

Khorev remarked to Forum 18 that the 26 July incident was "part of the normal life of our church." The Council of Churches has indeed reported similar occurrences elsewhere in Russia this year.

In March, FSB (former KGB) officers reportedly confiscated books from the travelling Christian library of an unregistered Baptist congregation in the southern region of Stavropol, threatening legal consequences should its activity continue. In May, the Council of Churches reported that police removed a tent from the evangelistic meeting of its members in the town of Yalutorovsk, Tyumen region. Accused of violating the procedure for conducting mass meetings, street processions, demonstrations and pickets under Article 20, Part 2 of the Administrative Violations Code, six members of the Yalutorovsk group were reportedly sentenced to five days in a detention centre, while four were fined a total of 8,000 roubles (1,984 Norwegian kroner, 240 Euros or 256 US dollars).

According to a further Council of Churches statement, police destroyed a tent erected by a congregation in the town of Chernyanka in the south-western Belgorod region, on 1 June. Two days later, the document continues, officers broke up an open air worship service at the same site and detained all the Baptists present, holding them at a local police station for approximately four hours.

Forum 18 has been unable to obtain any response from the officials dealing with religious affairs in these areas. Questioning Blazhenov about the general situation for the unregistered Baptists in Russia, however, he replied that it was the first time he had heard of such incidents. "Citizens must obey the laws of whatever country they live in," he remarked, pointing out that a March for Jesus through the capital in June had taken place without any form of obstruction. The various Protestant organisers of this event had informed the authorities of their plans in advance, he added, who had arranged corresponding security and emergency medical provision.

Forum 18 notes that, while an individual member of a religious group may rent premises for worship in theory, in Moscow the absence of legal personality status nevertheless prevents the capital's unregistered Baptist congregation from doing so in practice (see F18News 13 March 2003). Its approximately 700 members are thus unable to meet as a whole congregation, and usually gather in numerous individual private flats.

Over the summer, Khorev reported, the Baptists found one solution in meeting at various sites in forests around the city. This, notes Forum 18, marks a return to their practice of the Soviet period.

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