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BELARUS: "We don't have such persecution here. We're absolutely democratic"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Belarusian officials continue to harass New Life Full Gospel Church, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. On 4 January the church received a summons from the Minsk City Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Committee, claiming that the church had polluted the ground around its building with oil, causing large amounts of damage. Church members reject the allegation, Sergei Lukanin noting that "for some reason they only took samples from the road which comes into the car park. Of course they're going to find traces of oil there." Belarus also continues to people for the "offence" of unregistered religious activity. Challenged about two heavy fines of a pensioner for this "offence", Lyudmila Paprakova of Grodno Ideology Department told Forum 18 that "we don't have such persecution here. We're absolutely democratic." After a woman was fined for allowing her home to be used for unregistered meetings for worship, Alla Starikevich of Brest City Ideology Department described the role of officials who started the case as "to maintain mutual relations with religious communities."

Belarus continues to harass and fine people conducting unregistered religious activity, Forum 18 News Service has found. The most recent example of this is using the Minsk City Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Committee to continue the state's long-running campaign against New Life Church in the capital Minsk. Also, two heavy fines have been imposed on a 68-year old pensioner in Grodno [Hrodna] and a woman in Brest was fined for allowing her home to be used for unregistered meetings for worship.

As well as this, two Polish Catholic priests working in parishes in Grodno Region have been banned from religious work after the end of 2009. Officials gave no reasons for the decisions (see F18News 5 January 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1392).

Environmental Committee against New Life Church

Belarusian state officials are continuing to harass New Life Full Gospel Church in Minsk, this time using the Environmental Committee, Forum 18 has learnt. On 4 January the church received a summons from the Minsk City Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Committee, which claimed that the church had polluted the ground around its building with traces of oil, causing damage amounting to 262,798,725 Belarusian Roubles (523,380 Norwegian Kroner, 63,736 Euros or 91,887 US Dollars).

The summons also warned that a case against the Church had been launched under the Code of Administrative Violations. If found guilty, the Church would be liable to a fine in addition to the "compensation", Church lawyer Sergei Lukanin told Forum 18 on 5 January. The summons warned that if the compensation is not paid, the Environmental Committee will bring a case to the Economic Court to seize property to pay the compensation.

Church members reject the allegation that they have polluted the site and insist that the church car park is clean and tidy. "I saw the inspectors when they came in December," Lukanin told Forum 18. "For some reason they only took samples from the road which comes into the car park. Of course they're going to find traces of oil there." He said the Church would therefore refuse to pay the compensation demanded or any fine.

Lukanin added that the environmental inspectors admitted to him "with a smile" that they had not undertaken the inspection at their own initiative but were "sent" to do so.

Tatyana Abramchik, the deputy head of the Minsk City Environmental Committee, laughed when Forum 18 asked about the penalty imposed on New Life Church and insisted that Forum 18's questions were "not correct". "Maybe cars were parked where they shouldn't be – we saw them when we visited," she told Forum 18 on 5 January. "They have no permission to use the land for parking. They don't behave properly."

Forum 18 repeatedly asked how many similar inspections had taken place of car parks attached to other places of worship in Minsk, but Abramchik each time refused to say. But she insisted her Committee "has documents" on 90 per cent of the city's places of

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worship. She did not explain what sort of documents her Committee needs.

Lukanin points out that New Life Church has little a court could seize to pay any fines as it had its land confiscated by a court in 2005 and its building formally confiscated in August 2009. "So technically we own no property. The authorities know this."

The Church continues to use the building, which it bought on the outskirts of Minsk in 2002 and renovated at its own expense. Church members and sympathisers have carried out acts of civil disobedience in response to the state campaign to deprive the church of its place of worship (see eg. F18News 24 August 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1339).

Church lawyer Lukanin linked the latest penalties from the Environmental Committee to a 17 December 2009 European Parliament resolution on Belarus, which included a call for the New Life Church to be able to "operate freely". "All this came immediately afterwards."

Lukanin said the Humanitarian Assistance Department of the Presidential Administration warned the local representative of the international Christian charity the Samaritan's Purse against working with New Life. The charity was told, Lukanin said, that if any of their Christmas shoebox gifts sent from abroad were distributed through the New Life Church or any congregations of the Full Gospel Association, the whole scheme would be cancelled.

"So we had to miss out on this," Lukanin lamented. "This is unlikely to have been a decision of the Humanitarian Assistance Department – it must have come from higher up the Presidential Administration, or the KGB secret police."

Forum 18 was unable to reach the Humanitarian Assistance Department on 5 January.

Pensioner fined for unregistered meetings for worship

Late 2009 saw continuing raids and fines on religious communities and believers meeting without state registration. In defiance of international human rights norms, Belarus bans unregistered religious activity and imposes penalties on those engaged in it (see F18News 11 November 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1374). For example, following two heavy fines of a pensioner for the "offence" of unregistered religious activity, Protestants told Forum 18 on 6 January that he did not appeal against them.

On 19 July 2009, Andrei Yaroshevich, chief specialist of the Ideology Department of Grodno City Executive Committee, accompanied by V. Skripko of the Grodno Regional Religious Affairs Department and several police officers, raided the Sunday morning service of the Salvation Pentecostal congregation, court documents seen by Forum 18 reveal. The congregation - which did not have the 20 adult members or a legally-approved place to meet, both required for compulsory state registration - met in a hut in the yard of Yevgeny Bakun's home. Yaroshevich drew up a record of an administrative offence and the case was passed on to the court.

On 17 August, Judge Dmitry Kobrinets of Grodno's Lenin District Court fined Bakun for holding Sunday meetings for worship on his property without state registration. According to the court verdict seen by Forum 18, he gathered up to 30 people "into a stable group of fellow-believers by use of agitation". He was found guilty of violating Article 9.9 Part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code, which punishes the creation or leadership of a religious organisation without state registration. Bakun, a 68-year-old pensioner with disabilities, was fined 140,000 Belarusian Roubles (280 Norwegian Kroner, 34 Euros or 49 US Dollars).

On 8 September Bakun was again fined by Judge Dmitry Kedal of the same court, this time under Article 23.34 Part 2 of the Administrative Violations Code, which punishes violating regulations for holding demonstrations or other mass events. Bakun was fined 700,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,401 Norwegian Kroner, 171 Euros or 245 US Dollars). The court verdict, seen by Forum 18, stresses that Bakun was given the "minimum possible fine" under this Article, given his age, state of health, "level of his guilt" and ability to pay.

Protestants told Forum 18 that the fines are being automatically deducted from Bakun's pension in instalments, as he did not pay them within one month. At the time of the hearings, pensions for second category invalids such as Bakun were 323,000 Belarusian Roubles (641 Norwegian Kroner, 78 Euros or 113 US Dollars) per month.

"We don't have such persecution here. We're absolutely democratic."

Yaroshevich was off sick when Forum 18 called the Ideology Department in Grodno on 6 January. However, his colleague Lyudmila Paprakova said that although she was not familiar with Bakun's case "we don't have such persecution here. We're absolutely democratic."

Told the details of the court case, Paprakova admitted that the fines on Bakun were large, but defended them. "Let him pray at home with his family, but if he conducts propaganda and attracts others that is not permitted," she told Forum 18. "He doesn't have the right to gather 30 people – that's already an organisation and that's not allowed."

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Asked why Yaroshevich of the Ideology Department was involved in raiding private property to interrupt a religious service, Paprakova rejected any criticism. "Yaroshevich is a good young man – he has a conscience." Asked what ideology her Department promotes, Paprakova replied: "That each citizen will love their country, be proud of it and respect the law. Belarus is a wonderful country."

Igor Popov, head of the Religious Affairs Department at Grodno Regional Executive Committee, refused to answer any of Forum 18's questions on 5 January.

Fined for allowing home to be used for unregistered worship

Another example from late 2009 was a woman fined for allowing her home to be used for unregistered worship. Yelena Oktysyuk has appealed against her conviction to the Supreme Court, but as of 6 January 2010 there has been no response to the appeal.

In August 2009, a City Executive Committee Ideology Department official and a police officer in the western city of Brest visited a Friday evening prayer service in Oktysyuk's home, held by a local Council of Churches Baptist congregation. The two visitors, who explained who they were, questioned congregation members about why they were meeting for worship and who was the leader, Oktysyuk told Forum 18 from Brest on 5 January. She said she was not at the service but with her children in the separate living quarters of the building.

Oktysyuk was then punished for allowing her home to be used for worship. On 1 September, Brest's Lenin District Court found her guilty of violating Article 9.9 Part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code. Oktysyuk was fined 180,000 Belarusian Roubles (359 Norwegian Kroner, 44 Euros or 63 US Dollars), which she told Forum 18 was the equivalent of half her monthly wage.

Court officials confirmed to Forum 18 on 5 January that Oktysyuk had been fined, but refused to give any more details, saying that they do not give out information to journalists as "it's none of your business".

Oktysyuk appealed against the punishment to Brest Regional Court. She argued that the decision was unjust as women cannot lead Council of Churches Baptist congregations. She also maintained that on the day officials visited the service – when the state witnesses testified that they had seen her – she was not present. However, on 29 October the Court rejected her challenge and upheld the fine.

"I haven't paid the fine as I consider I have done nothing wrong," Oktysyuk told Forum 18.

"It is our job to maintain mutual relations with religious communities"

Defending the actions of her official was Alla Starikevich, head of the Brest City Ideology Department. "We were fulfilling state functions," she told Forum 18 from Brest on 6 January. Asked why visiting a religious community uninvited who were meeting for worship in a private home was a state function, Starikevich responded: "It is our job to maintain mutual relations with religious communities."

While stressing that the fine was imposed on Oktysyuk by a court, Starikevich added: "According to our Religion Law, meeting for religious purposes in private homes is not envisaged." Asked why religious believers cannot meet together in private homes, she responded: "When I want to pray I go to church. And you have the temerity to ring me up about this on the eve of [Orthodox] Christmas." She then put the phone down. [Christmas in Belarus is celebrated by the Orthodox Church on 7 January.]

Oktysyuk told Forum 18 that raids and fines on unregistered Baptist communities such as her own have increased in the last year or so. (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 compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

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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