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RUSSIA: Baptist and Jehovah's Witness worship services raided

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Worship services of Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses have suffered recent raids by Russian law enforcement agencies, many involving the FSB security service, Forum 18 News Service has learned. After the latest, 9 July raid on Jehovah's Witness worship, officials - including an FSB officer and two Prosecutor's Office investigators - found nothing illegal but still held back all who had taken part in the service, writing down their names, addresses and telephone numbers. From 12 July, investigators interrogated more than 20 congregation members, proving most interested in the structure of the community, its aims and goals, members' religious convictions and the distribution of religious literature. A Baptist congregation similarly treated was given as authority a poorly photocopied court decision justifying the raid "in view of the fact that meetings of an unregistered religious organisation" were held in the raided building. Russian law does not require religious communities to register or seek state permission for home worship. Officials have been unwilling to discuss their actions with Forum 18.

A 9 July raid on a Jehovah's Witness service in Kirovo-Chepetsk (Kirov Region) is the latest in a series of raids on worship services, many involving the FSB security service, Forum 18 News Service notes. "The unexpected arrival during a peaceful religious service of such a number of people in uniform disturbed the believers and obstructed its usual course," the Jehovah's Witnesses complained.

The ongoing nationwide state campaign against the Jehovah's Witnesses has seen more than ten raids on their worship in 2010 (see most recently F18News 25 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1426).

A group of officials - including an FSB officer and two Prosecutor's Office investigators - conducted the latest Jehovah's Witness raid. Despite finding nothing illegal during their search of the building, they held back all those who had taken part in the service and wrote down each one's name, address and telephone number, informing them that they would later be summoned for questioning. From 12 July, investigators interrogated more than 20 congregation members. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, they were most interested in the structure of the community, its aims and goals, members' religious convictions and the distribution of religious literature.

The duty officer at the Kirov Region FSB referred all enquiries to their spokesperson Svetlana Mikhailovna (whose surname he refused to give), but on 29 July her telephone went unanswered.

Baptists raided

On 18 April, about 12 state officials including an FSB security service officer, Emergency Situations Ministry personnel and others in civilian clothes raided the Sunday morning worship service of the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in Elektrostal (Moscow Region). The unregistered church meets in a private home.

The officials immediately called for the service to be halted and for all those present to show their identity documents. "Despite our objections, everything was filmed on a video-camera from the start," church members complained. The officials then presented a photocopy of a court decision "to conduct searches of homes and ancillary premises belonging to the International Council of Evangelical Christians/Baptists and to record all the people found there .. in view of the fact that meetings of an unregistered religious organisation are held in them". Officials refused to give the Baptists a copy of the decision; as the photocopy was poor they say it was impossible to read the signature of the judge.

Despite what the decision implies, Russian law does not require religious communities to register or seek state permission for home worship, Forum 18 notes.

In the absence of and without permission from the home owner, the officials searched and photographed each room, including the attic. They also took several private letters without drawing up an official record. Questioned in turn, church members were forced to say where they live and work, how often and since when they attend church, and to name the church's leader. They were also asked how much they contribute to church funds and about the church's distribution of literature. One officer reportedly suggested to a church member "Don't come here, go to the [Orthodox] church, pray there and light a candle".

Pastor Andrei Meshcherin of the church was detained for two and a half hours at local police station. When he refused to say where he worked, FSB officer Rychazhkov told him he knew where he worked anyway, "and soon we will have you sacked".

Late on 19 April, a group of youths shouting at the "Baptist sectarians" came to the church building, banged on the doors and broke all the front windows. Church members suspect the authorities may have encouraged the attack.

Rychazhkov of the FSB threatened the church with a court case, saying that it would be closed down as it is unregistered. A case was later launched under the Administrative Violations Code over what officials claimed was a lack of fire extinguishers. However, on 29 April Elektrostal Town Court halted the case "because of a lack of the substance of an administrative offence," Pastor Meshcherin told Forum 18 on 10 June.

Pastor Meshcherin also said FSB officer Rychazhkov had visited the church in autumn 2009 under the guise of checking up identity documents of those present.

Officers at Elektrostal FSB refused to discuss why the Baptist church has been raided more than once while at worship, with the participation of their officers. "I'm not authorised to give any information," one officer told Forum 18 on 10 June. He said he personally had not taken part in any of the raids. He also denied that they have any officer named Rychazhkov.

Other 2010 raids on worship

On the morning of 4 June, police raided two worship premises and five Jehovah's Witness homes in Omsk, seizing literature, documents, computers and sound equipment - in one instance even noting down the contents of a first aid kit. Omsk Regional Public Prosecutor's Office opened a criminal case against the local Jehovah's Witness religious organisation under Article 282, Part 1 ("actions directed at the incitement of hatred or enmity, as well as the humiliation of human dignity"), suspecting it of circulating extremist literature among members, the Prosecutor's Office reported on its website on 7 June.

On 15 April, nine police Counterextremism Department officers arrived to raid a Jehovah's Witness worship service in Komsomolsk-on-Amur (Khabarovsk Region). After Nikolai Kovadneva asked them not to interrupt, he was held in a temporary detention facility for 48 hours and fined 500 Roubles (99 Norwegian Kroner, 13 Euros, or 17 US Dollars) for allegedly obstructing police. The police officers agreed to question worshippers after the service, and did not allow anyone to leave the building for its duration.

From 24-25 March, law enforcement agents raided three Jehovah's Witness worship services and – having thereby obtained names and addresses – four members' homes in Ryazan Region, seizing religious literature, recorded music, films, personal correspondence, diaries and computers.

Eleven police officers armed with automatic weapons and accompanied by police dogs raided the Sunday morning service of a Lutheran congregation in Kaluga on 28 February, looking for alleged "extremist literature". The pastor subsequently produced advice about how to behave during a raid (see F18News 23 March 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1425).

Homes raided

In their search for banned Jehovah's Witness literature, police also continue to raid private homes, including those of the elderly and infirm:

On the morning of 23 June, police raided the home of wheelchair-bound Robert Kozyrev in Nogir (North Ossetia Republic), seizing outlawed Jehovah's Witness literature.

On 24 March, police in Zalesovo (Altai Region) telephoned Irma Mikhel, an elderly Jehovah's Witness in very poor health, and summoned her for questioning. When she refused, two officers of the FSB security and ordinary police pushed their way into her home and started examining her bookcase, pulling out titles on Biblical themes. When Mikhel protested that these were not banned, the FSB officer replied: "Not yet, but they soon will be." Taking her to a local police station, they then interrogated her for three hours and forced her to sign a statement saying she had given up her literature voluntarily.

Outdoor public religious activity by Russian Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna devotees and Protestants has also resulted in state harassment (see F18News 26 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1469).

The Traffic Police and other law enforcement agencies continue to stop and search Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslim readers of Said Nursi's works for literature banned under counterextremism legislation (see F18News 27 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1470). (END)

For more background, see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1196.

Analysis of the background to Russian policy on "religious extremism" is available in two articles: - 'How the battle with "religious extremism" began' (F18News 27 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1287 - and - 'The battle with "religious extremism" - a return to past methods?' (F18News 28 April 2009 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1288).

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <http://www.samstar.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, is at F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <http://www.sova-center.ru>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

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 Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>.

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