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RUSSIA: Tula Baptist & Orthodox churches under attack?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Pastors of one of the largest unregistered Baptist churches in Russia, in Tula, have told Forum 18 News Service that they believe their prayer house was the victim of a deliberate attack in January, when two powerful explosions ripped through the building's interior. However, Viktor Orlov and Aleksandr Lakhtikov told Forum 18 that they do not know who caused the explosions. The timing of the incident - just before a major conference at the church to be attended by Baptist leaders from all over Russia - is thought to be particularly suspicious. Also in Tula, two Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox churches have suffered arson attacks in recent months. One of the Orthodox parish priests referred Forum 18 to "that inexplicable explosion" at the Baptist prayer house, and described both it and the arson attacks as "links in the same chain."

Two powerful explosions which ripped through the interior of their 11-metre-high prayer house in the early hours of the morning on 13 January were planned, believe Baptist pastors Viktor Orlov and Aleksandr Lakhtikov. Speaking to Forum 18 News Service on 5 February at the church building - located in the city of Tula (approximately 120km south of Moscow) - the pastors added, however, that they do not know the identity of the perpetrators. Two church members received serious burns in the incident.

Pastor Lakhtikov explained to Forum 18 that several days prior to the explosion the church watchman had been alerted by noises in the basement and found an outside door open when he went to investigate. Shortly before the first explosion at approximately 3.15 am, he said, the watchman heard an object drop to the ground in a basement room and break open. Pastor Lakhtikov suggests that this was a container of explosive gas, which could have been ignited by a timed device once dispersed. Within just minutes of the explosions, the fire brigade arrived at the church, he said, followed by police and a local FSB official. The FSB official reportedly asked church representatives whether they had done any work on the pipe supplying gas to the building - which they had not - and immediately identified a dark stripe on it as the cause of a domestic gas leak.

Pastor Lakhtikov told Forum 18 that at 6am - less than three hours after the explosions - the story was aired on the news bulletin of national state-controlled television channel ORT. Quoted in local state newspaper "Sloboda" on 15 January, Tula city police chief Nikolai Rodinkov stated that "the premises were filled with gas - we presume that there was a gas leak, after which the explosion took place." On 14 January another local Tula newspaper, Molodoi Komunar, published a photograph of the church's domestic gas canister after it had been removed from the building, showing a long, clean rip down its centre. The Baptist pastors, however, argue that the canister must have opened due to the extraordinary heat and pressure of the explosions occurring outside it, since the entire canister would have shattered if the gas had exploded inside it.

Pastor Lakhtikov also pointed out to Forum 18 that Tula's city gas authority came at approximately 8am on the morning of the explosions and established that there was no evidence of domestic gas within a 50-metre radius of the church - even though traces usually remain in the air for up to four days after an explosion caused by domestic gas has taken place. None of the church's three gas stoves was damaged in the incident, the pastors added.

Church members believe that the timing of the explosion - on the eve of a series of meetings and a conference attended by leaders of the International Union of Baptist Churches from as far afield as Kazakhstan, Siberia and the Caucasus - is particularly suspicious. "If someone just wanted to destroy this property, they didn't need to do so on the eve of a major conference," Pastor Lakhtikov remarked. Two days of leadership talks were due to begin at 8am on the morning of the explosions, he said, followed by an evangelisation conference to be attended by approximately 400 church members. According to Pastor Orlov, it would not have been easy for outsiders to find out that such gatherings were to take place.

Originally formed in 1961, the International Union of Baptist Churches adheres 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. Pastor Lakhtikov told Forum 18 that police officers and FSB officials make regular visits to the Tula church - one of the largest in the Union - in an attempt to get it to register, although this is not compulsory under Russia's 1997 law on religion. "The law says that church and state are separate and talks about freedom of conscience, but they don't want it to work," he remarked. "They want us to register because they want the church to be under the complete control of the state." In recent years Tula church members have been fined or detained for up to 15 days if they hold public evangelisation events, he added, while in January 2004 they finally failed in their legal attempt to recover two domestic properties confiscated in the 1960s and 70s by the Soviet authorities because they were used to hold

worship services. "We were told that we wouldn't get a kopeck," he said.

On 10 February Forum 18 spoke to the parish priests of two Moscow Patriarchate churches in Tula which suffered arson attacks in October and November 2003. In both incidents, the church door was reportedly set alight with up to 10 litres of petrol or kerosene. Both Fr Sergi and Fr Viktor thought that the two fires had been set by the same people, and Fr Viktor speculated that they were either satanists or "ruthless people" rather than tramps or hooligans: "They used a canister of petrol – and that costs money." While he did not wish to associate Orthodox with Baptists, Fr Viktor also remarked upon "that inexplicable explosion" at the prayer house, and described both it and the arson attacks as "links in the same chain." Pastor Aleksandr Lakhtikov, however, ruled out the possibility of the explosion having been planned by either satanists or hooligans: "Specialists worked on this." He added that it was difficult to know whether or not the incident had been planned locally.

On 11 February the telephones of regional officials dealing with religious organisations went unanswered. When Forum 18 described the explosion to a Moscow-based Russian political researcher closely familiar with the situation in Tula region on 10 February, he said that there were no criminal groups in the area interested in such issues. While local communist officials might sympathise, they certainly would not organise such an incident, he said, and the "very provincial" local FSB would not engage in any sort of independent activity. Consequently, remarked the researcher, "all local variants are very weak."

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom

survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

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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