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RUSSIA: Foreign missionaries in Sakhalin face restrictions

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Russian Orthodox Deacon Andrei Khvylya-Olinter recently claimed on a Sakhalin radio programme that 70 per cent of the island's economy is in the hands of "sectarian structures", and warned of "involvement in intelligence gathering of foreign so-called pastors." Judging by local state support for a recent conference devoted to "Spiritual Security" and the tightening of religious work visa restrictions encountered by local Protestants and Catholics, who Forum 18 News Service has met, it appears that the regional authorities share his concerns.

"We all watched the break-up of the USSR, but few people realise that there are plans to split Russia into several countries," guest Deacon Andrei Khvylya-Olinter told his interviewer during a recent edition of the state-run Radio Sakhalin's weekly Orthodox programme. "Look at where the Catholics have formed their dioceses on Russian territory, for instance - right in the centres of future states." He went on to warn listeners that 70 per cent of Sakhalin's economy was already in the hands of "sectarian structures", and cited a report presented by Deputy Nina Krivelskaya to Russia's parliament in 1997. "The majority of so-called pastors are US and Korean citizens who are actively involved in Sakhalin's businesses... the activity of South Korean missionary groups is frequently anti-Russian... the local media has repeatedly reported the involvement in intelligence gathering of foreign so-called pastors."

The very same quotation appears in the resolution of a 10 February conference on "Issues of Spiritual Security in Sakhalin Region" organised by Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk and Kuriles Orthodox diocese and held at Sakhalin State University. As well as endorsing Krivelskaya's remarks, conference participants - including Sakhalin's vice-governor and department of justice chief - maintain in their resolution that the issue of foreign religious activity has reached a point where "the preservation of Russia's spiritual security" is at stake. In response, they propose the introduction of a regional law on missionary activity and deeper co-operation between local state organs and the Orthodox diocese (see forthcoming F18News article).

This fear of foreign religious influence on Sakhalin is felt by local Protestants in the form of visa restrictions for guest workers from churches abroad, Bishop Petr Yarmolyuk of the region's Pentecostal Union told Forum 18 on 24 April. A "difficult period" in this regard began at the start of 2004, he said: "Now visas are granted for only a single month - almost as soon as you receive one, you have to begin applying for the next." Since such visas are not granted unless a foreign religious worker is formally invited by a registered local religious organisation - "which sometimes doesn't receive information about an invitation application for over a month" - it has also become difficult for local Protestants to organise church events with foreign participation, added Yarmolyuk.

There are currently ten South Korean missionaries on Sakhalin at the invitation of predominantly ethnic Korean Presbyterian and Methodist churches, South Korean pastor Choi Sin Chur told Forum 18 at his Baptist church in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk on 25 April. (Approximately six per cent of islanders are ethnic Korean, although the majority speak only Russian.) While Choi - who has a residency permit - said that most of the other Korean missionaries hold three-month rather than single-month visas, he concurred with Yarmolyuk that visa regulations had become stricter from the start of 2004.

Both Yarmolyuk and Choi told Forum 18 that one South Korean Methodist pastor who held a religious work visa - Mun Khi In - was denied entry to Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk in April 2002. Choi added that two more South Korean religious workers - one from Mun Khi In's church and another from a Presbyterian church in Ulegorsk (approximately 200km north of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk) - were refused applications for religious work visas in 2001. Yarmolyuk estimated that approximately 80 per cent of foreign church workers were successful in their visa applications to Sakhalin, however, and Choi appeared to accept the situation: "We are in a foreign country - the authorities lay down the rules and we try to follow."

While Catholic parish priest Fr Emile Dumas was issued a single-month visa in early January 2004, it had expired by the time he was able to return to Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk after emergency surgery in his native United States, he told Forum 18 on 24 April. After following the application process again in February, he said, he received a three-month visa just as he had done on several occasions in 2003: "We always request a one-year visa, but you take whatever you get." While Fr Emile told Forum 18 that he had twice held a one-year visa prior to 2003, he appeared as similarly resigned to the tightening regulations as was Choi: "As a foreigner I can understand the restrictions - they are getting like that in the US now."

However, both Choi and Fr Emile expressed concern to Forum 18 that the cost incurred by frequent visa applications was beginning

to harm church life. Forced to return to South Korea and apply for a new visa every three months, Choi said that his colleagues were in perpetual uncertainty over whether they would receive a new visa and for how long a period, "which is stressful when you're waiting and you've already bought a return air ticket." According to Fr Emile, three foreign nuns who help with parish work – two Indians and one Korean – are now questioning their future on Sakhalin due to the considerable expense of having to leave Russia every few months in order to obtain a new visa. A single return trip to Seoul, for example, costs a minimum of 700 US dollars (4,785 Norwegian Kroner or 577 Euros), he said.

While Fr Emile acknowledged to Forum 18 that the visa restrictions affect other foreign personnel on Sakhalin - most of whom work for the oil and gas industries – he pointed out that their employers had the funds to keep sending them abroad, "but Catholic orders don't".

Local religious believers in Sakhalin region face local state restrictions on both mission (see F18News 1 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=331) and using premises for worship (see F18News 7 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=335).

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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