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RUSSIA: Do foreign missionaries bear "the hallmarks of espionage" in Khabarovsk region?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

Local Orthodox in Khabarovsk share the concerns of Orthodox in Sakhalin region about foreign missionaries, complaining to Forum 18 News Service of "espionage" and "Catholic expansion". However, throughout most of Khabarovsk region, Baptists, Catholics, and members of the New Apostolic Church have told Forum 18 that they have not recently encountered problems regarding access or visas for foreign missionaries. One exception appears to be access by foreign religious personnel to closed cities, which is reportedly very difficult to obtain, even though US citizens are employed at a military facility in one such city. This issue particularly affects Catholics, as the majority of Catholic priests in Russia are foreigners. One anonymous Protestant source has also told Forum 18 that it is now practically impossible for foreign citizens to conduct informal religious work in the Russian Far East.

Even though Orthodox in Khabarovsk region have told Forum 18 News Service of concerns about foreign missionaries similar to those expressed by theirr co-religionists on Sakhalin (see F18News 16 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=342), Khabarovsk's local regulations on religious work visas appear somewhat more lenient than in Russia's Pacific island region.

"The penetration of a person onto foreign territory bears the hallmarks of espionage," Pavel Belykh of Khabarovsk-based Orthodox youth group Grad Kitezh remarked on 30 April, complaining to Forum 18 of "Catholic expansion" and incidents in which foreign missionaries had "gone to test soil in closed areas".

On 27 April, however, New Apostolic evangelist Vladimir Lukashenko told Forum 18 that his church - which is the co-ordination centre for other New Apostolic churches in the region – had never encountered difficulties when inviting foreign guests. Later the same day, Baptist pastor Gennadi Degtyarov responded similarly and pointed out that some ten foreign citizens are currently employed at Khabarovsk's Baptist Bible college. On 26 April, US Catholic parish priest Fr Joseph McCabe told Forum 18 that he and one of two Japanese nuns have six-month religious work visas, while the second sister's visa is valid for the maximum possible length of a year.

Some 20 foreign religious workers currently operate in Khabarovsk region, according to regional religious affairs official Mikhail Svishchev. Speaking to Forum 18 on 29 April, he said that Khabarovsk regional passport and visa service determines the period for which their visas are valid: "It depends upon each individual case." In a report listing 34 foreign missionary organisations active in Khabarovsk region compiled by Svishchev in 1999, he refers to only one expulsion – that of South Korean Presbyterian pastor Son Chun Sik - "for systematic violation of Russian law".

While he features in the list, there is no reference to the expulsion of Dan Pollard, the US founder and pastor of an independent Baptist church in the Pacific port of Vanino. First told he would be denied a visa in March 1998, Pollard was officially barred from Russia until March 2004 in accordance with a 2 April 1999 decision by Khabarovsk region's internal affairs department. The Vanino Baptists are still unable to invite their pastor, however, Inna Vaulina of the community told Forum 18 on 18 April. After a Khabarovsk city court declared the decision to bar Pollard invalid on 15 May 2002, she said, the church tried to invite him in October of the same year but were informed that the secret police, the FSB, had lost their application. After submitting the necessary documents a second time in 2003, continued Vaulina, the Baptists were told that Pollard "may not be allowed on Russian territory for reasons of state security."

Speaking to Forum 18 in Khabarovsk on 28 April, the Vanino church's lawyer said that she had subsequently sent an enquiry to the FSB federal headquarters in Moscow asking why Pollard was still barred when there was no longer any legal basis to exclude him. "They replied that they had nothing against him," Olga Fyodorova told Forum 18, "but he still hasn't been able to return."

Religious affairs official Svishchev at first maintained to Forum 18 that Pollard could return to Khabarovsk region if he wished, but then added that he could no longer be based in Vanino. Under new legislation on border areas, he explained, special reasons are required for foreign citizens to reside within five kilometres of federal borders, "and religious reasons aren't among them".

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Several Catholic sources have remarked to Forum 18 recently that a particular problem arises on Russia's far eastern mainland with regard to closed cities, since foreign citizens require FSB permission to visit them and the great majority of Catholic priests in Russia are by necessity foreign.

Although US citizens are employed at a defence facility in Bolshoi Kamen, for example, the application process for a permit allowing a priest to make a single visit to local Catholics in the city is reportedly so complex that "in the case of a sick person needing the sacraments, it takes impossibly long". In Komsomolsk-on-Amur – a closed city during the Soviet period and then again from 2002 - the 40-strong Catholic parish has reportedly been granted only one out of four such applications over the past two years. According to local lawyer Igor Bukhtoyarov, South Korean pastor Kim Ge Khen led a Presbyterian church in Komsomolsk-on-Amur at the invitation of its ethnic Korean residents until the city's closure in 2002, when his visa was revoked.

Svishchev told Forum 18 that applications for foreign religious personnel to visit believers in closed cities are passed from the passport and visa service to the FSB, "who approve them – there shouldn't be any problems." He was unable to recall the case of Kim Ge Khen, but maintained that two foreign Methodists were currently setting up a church in Komsomolsk-on-Amur.

Svishchev also insisted to Forum 18 that the foreign religious personnel in Khabarovsk region all work within the local religious organisations that have invited them, "just as they're supposed to do – they're law-abiding in that respect". One anonymous source in the Russian Far East recently confirmed to Forum 18 that it is now practically impossible for foreign citizens to conduct any kind of informal religious work in the region. Without a religious work visa, the source – who runs seminars for Sunday school teachers and worships with an unregistered Christian group – is unable to take any official church role, maintain open contact with mission organisations or mention religion other than in private, face-to-face conversations.

While the source maintained that the eccentric manner of a few independent missionaries who were later expelled from the region had aroused the suspicion of the local state authorities, the source added that charitable initiatives by even local Christians are subject to intrusive inspection by low-level state officials, who regularly insist that a charity may not conduct any form of religious activity.

Local religious believers in Khabarovsk region face local state restrictions on mission (see F18News 1 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=332) and in obtaining premises for non-Orthodox worship in Khabarovsk city (see F18News 7 June http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=336).

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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