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RUSSIA: Jehovah's Witness congress broken up

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

Since 1996, Jehovah's Witnesses have held an annual Urals regional congress in the Yekaterinburg city stadium. But last Friday (23 July), the stadium management abruptly demanded four times the agreed fee, then, on Saturday, men claiming to be security guards tried to block the entrance, then the electricity supply was switched off, then 1,000 delegates were evicted from their accommodation, then the stadium management played loud music to drown out speakers, and finally the management with the security guards told delegates to disperse. Jehovah's Witness leaders then called off the congress. In April, the authorities in the neighbouring Urals region of Tyumen cancelled a similarly large-scale Protestant Easter service in a city stadium. Also in April, the Jehovah's Witness Yekaterinburg congregation had its rental contract with the 'house of culture' abruptly cancelled, following the court decision barring Jehovah's Witness activity in Moscow 1,500 km (930 miles) west.

On the second day of their annual Urals regional congress (Saturday 24 July), more than 5,000 Jehovah's Witnesses were reportedly forced to abandon the Yekaterinburg city stadium which they had hired for the event. "We couldn't imagine such a thing happening – it took us completely by surprise," local Jehovah's Witness representative Sergei Tantsura remarked to Forum 18 News Service on 25 July. Speaking to Forum 18 in Yekaterinburg just five days prior to the event, Tantsura pointed out that his religious organisation had held a congress at the Uralmash stadium every year since 1996.

This year, however, the Jehovah's Witnesses' problems began on the first day of the event (Friday 23 July), Forum 18 was told. According to Tantsura, the assistant director of the stadium, Stanislav Chizh, suddenly claimed that the figure of 100,000 roubles [24,215 Norwegian Kroner, 2,850 Euros, or 3,439 US Dollars] – which the Jehovah's Witnesses had already paid in full as a rental fee – had not been authorised and did not reflect the stadium's actual expenses for staging the event. When Chizh demanded a further 400,000 roubles [96,842 Norwegian Kroner, 11,399 Euros, or 13,753 US Dollars], added Tantsura, the Jehovah's Witnesses refused to pay, arguing that they had concluded a valid legal contract for the original sum with the stadium's director – who is currently on holiday – on 1 June 2004.

In response, Chizh threatened to halt the congress, said Tantsura, and when delegates arrived on Saturday morning (24 July) they found access to the stadium blocked by some ten young men in sportswear claiming to be private security guards. As these men had neither uniforms nor authorised documentation, however, the delegates subsequently managed to enter the stadium, Tantsura told Forum 18. After finding that the electricity supply had been switched off and the power supply room locked, he continued, the Jehovah's Witnesses continued the congress with the assistance of a portable generator.

Then, during the lunch break on Saturday, said Tantsura, the director of the Manezh – a nearby complex which, like the stadium, belongs to Uralmash car factory – announced with regret that the 1,000 delegates staying there would have to vacate their rooms that same day. Having planned to stay in Yekaterinburg until Sunday night, some delegates left the city straight away, he added, while the remainder moved to the homes of local Jehovah's Witnesses.

Tantsura told Forum 18 that the final disruption occurred at 3.10 pm on Saturday afternoon, when the stadium administration turned on loud music to drown out the congress. At first the delegate speaking continued his address, he said, but after approximately 15 minutes Stanislav Chizh appeared with the alleged security guards and told the delegates to disperse. After a brief meeting, a committee of Jehovah's Witness leaders then decided to call off the congress in order to avoid a possibly dangerous situation developing, continued Tantsura.

Since the events took place at a weekend, the Jehovah's Witnesses have not had any contact with representatives of the state authorities, Tantsura told Forum 18. While Stanislav Chizh insisted that his actions were his own decision, however, Tantsura said that he referred to some kind of instructions in one telephone conversation, so that the Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe that he was acting independently, particularly since they have used the stadium without incident in the past.

Contacted by Forum 18 on 26 July, Stanislav Chizh said that he could not comment on the weekend's events: "I don't know anything."

Speaking to Forum 18 on 27 July, Sverdlovsk (Yekaterinburg) regional religious affairs official Grigori Vertigil said that he had

received neither verbal nor written information about the congress being disrupted. Local television news had reported that the event had taken place despite small demonstrations by local citizens, he said. When Forum 18 related further details regarding the rental contract for the event, Vertigil suggested that economic relations between the two parties may have caused some kind of disagreement.

Earlier this year, Jehovah's Witnesses in Yekaterinburg was forced to make alternative arrangements for its annual commemoration of Christ's death. A local house of culture suddenly annulled the congregation's rental contract for the 4 April event, reportedly "in connection with a court decision banning the activity of this religious organisation in Russia and in order to avoid a massive scandal" (see F18News 13 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=297). On 11 April the local authorities in the neighbouring Urals region of Tyumen cancelled a similarly large-scale Protestant Easter service in a city-owned stadium, citing what they said was a "terrorist threat" (see F18News 16 April 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=300).

The Russian state authorities have latterly been overtly critical of Jehovah's Witnesses. On the same day that a court ban on the activity of the Moscow Jehovah's Witness community came into force (see F18News 16 June 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=344), Viktor Ostroukhov, a member of Russia's official delegation at a Paris meeting of the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe), delivered a paper which included Jehovah's Witnesses among those "non-traditional religious teachings and sects disseminating xenophobic propaganda via the Internet" who "inculcate fanatical devotion and rejection of other religions in their followers."

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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