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BELARUS: Pressure mounts on Charismatic Minsk congregation

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

The authorities are close to obtaining sufficient grounds under Belarusian law, but against international law, to close down the charismatic New Life Church in Minsk, Forum 18 News Service has been told. An official warning against using a cowshed the 600-strong church owns for services was given to the church two days after the authorities fined the church administrator, Vasily Yurevich, about 150 times the monthly minimum wage for organising an "illegal" service at the cowshed. "We think they're trying to rush things through," Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko of the church told Forum 18. Following a second warning, the authorities could under Belarusian law move to close down the church. The church has been refused permission both to rent alternative premises and to convert the cowshed into a church. Forum 18 knows of two other charismatic Full Gospel Association congregations, which have also been refused the re-registration the 2002 Belarusian religion law required religious organisations to apply for.

Authorities in Minsk are close to obtaining sufficient grounds under Belarusian law to close down the charismatic New Life Church, after issuing it an official warning on 30 December against using a cowshed the church owns for worship. This was just two days after church administrator Vasily Yurevich was fined 3,600,000 Belarusian roubles (10,059 Norwegian kroner, 1,215 Euros or 1,654 US dollars) on charges of organising an "illegal" service at the cowshed (see F18News 29 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=480). This is about 150 times the monthly minimum wage.

"We think they're trying to rush things through," Pastor Vyacheslav Goncharenko of the church remarked to Forum 18 News Service on 17 January. "They issued this warning even before we received acknowledgement that our appeal against the fine had been lodged." Following a second warning, he added, the authorities could move to close down the church. Against international law, Belarus bans all unregistered religious activity.

Prosecution of Vasily Yurevich is the main motivation for the 30 December warning, a copy of which has been received by Forum 18. Signed by vice-chairman of Minsk city administration Mikhail Petrushin, the document also notes that New Life Church has, "in violation of Belarusian legislation, held religious gatherings from September to December 2004 on premises not specially intended for such purposes." After the church purchased the building in question - a disused cowshed - in 2002, all official agencies approved requests to change the designated land usage except for the religious affairs department of Minsk city administration. Without approval from this department, New Life Church was refused compulsory re-registration under the 2002 religion law as soon as a 16 November 2004 deadline expired (see F18News 17 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=454).

As a last resort, the 600-strong charismatic congregation has been using its cowshed for worship ever since being banned from renting a public 'house of culture' in September 2004. As Vasily Yurevich told procuracy officials in December, the church was earlier refused requests to rent public facilities by local administrations in every district of Minsk (see F18News 16 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=477).

A second official warning motivated by the church's continued use of the cowshed does not now appear to be far off. While the local district authorities' written threat to dismantle any unauthorised repair work to the cowshed could not be carried out by a deadline of 1 January 2005 because the church appealed against it, Pastor Goncharenko explained, a 5 January letter viewed by Forum 18 repeats this warning. Also issued by Nikolai Skipor, the first deputy head of Minsk's Moscow district, this latest document maintains that roofing work was seen to be carried out to the cowshed on 29 December 2004, and orders "the cessation of the unauthorised conversion of the cowshed into a house of worship." On this occasion no deadline is given.

Pastor Goncharenko maintains that while the church has carried out surface repair work to the cowshed, it has not altered the structure of building, which would constitute conversion. On 19 January he told Forum 18 that Nikolai Skipor had informed him in person earlier that day that an architectural commission would survey the cowshed on 28 January. "On the basis of that they will decide what to do with the building." A couple of hours after the pastor's meeting with Skipor, however, the official's colleague telephoned to say that the survey needed to be conducted straight away, said Goncharenko.

Notwithstanding a request that this demand be issued in writing, the church reported on 24 January that a Moscow district administration representative and 12 police officers turned up at the cowshed the previous day during Sunday worship, demanded

confirmation that the church had permission to hold the service and then proceeded to film it. Under the 2002 religion law, religious events may take place at premises not specially designed for them only after a corresponding decision by the local state authorities. According to church administrator Vasily Yurevich, the authorities are in this way trying to intimidate the entire congregation.

A second member of the charismatic Full Gospel Association to be denied re-registration under the 2002 Belarusian religious law is the 40-strong Word of Truth Church. This is currently meeting unhindered at private homes in Dzerzhinsk (Minsk region) since no court order has been issued for its liquidation. "We have no choice – we were expelled from the premises where we used to meet and we can't get new ones," the church's pastor Nikolai Kozel explained to Forum 18 on 17 January. "I was warned before I ran for parliamentary elections [6 October 2004] that there would be problems with re-registration" (see F18News 5 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=445)

According to Pastor Kozel, Word of Truth tried to re-register at an alternative address after being expelled from its rented premises, but, when a fire officer refused to withdraw his approval at the request of the district authorities, "they demanded supplementary documentation from the sanitation department which it could not provide." In addition to the absence of approved premises, he said, the church was subsequently denied re-registration on the grounds that its application was late, "even though we submitted before the 16 November deadline."

The telephone of Minsk regional affairs official Leonid Parkhimovich went unanswered on 21, 22 and 24 January.

The third Full Gospel Association congregation in Belarus to be refused re-registration, the 35-strong Church of Jesus Christ in Kozenki village (Gomel [Homyel'] region) hopes to register as a new religious organisation, its pastor Nikolai Turavets told Forum 18 on 17 January. After simultaneously submitting documents to Mozyr [Mazyr] district executive committee in which the same address was stipulated for re-registration of the church and the adoption of two children, he said, officials responded that the children could not be placed at an address where there would be church services.

"I told them it was just a legal address, it didn't mean we would have services there, but they said it was 'not expedient' and that they still considered the building to be a church," Pastor Turavets told Forum 18. As the deadline for re-registration expired during these deliberations, the pastor explained, the authorities then suggested that the church disband and register anew at a different address, while the issue of adoption is now "practically resolved."

Whereas Pastor Turavets maintained that the church submitted its application in early to mid- October 2004, however, Petr Shutko of Mozyr district executive committee claimed to Forum 18 on 21 January that he had warned them twice – in June and September – about the need to re-register, but its application was filed only at the end of October or the beginning of November. "The regional authorities told me they wouldn't make it in time, so I suggested that they disband and register anew," he said.

Shutko insisted to Forum 18 that this was the only reason for the re-registration refusal. "The adoption of the children wasn't an issue. They did want to re-register at the same address as where the children would be, but there was the question of housing conditions – they needed to finish off repairs, for which we gave them some funds." While describing as a "good family" adoptive parent Aleksandr Kovalchuk's family, and acknowledging that there was nothing in the law preventing adopted children from living at a church address, "we could not recommend that option," Shutko told Forum 18. "We give the children to a family, not to a church – having minors in a church is not the best option for their upbringing." (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478

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<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>

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