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BELARUS: Authorities cut electricity to charismatic church

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

The authorities' latest move against the charismatic New Life Church in Minsk is to cut off the electricity supply, forcing the church to borrow a generator to provide electricity. The power cut off came a day after the state energy inspectorate surveyed the building by order of Minsk's senior religious affairs official, Alla Ryabitseva. "We won't leave the property," church administrator Vasily Yurevich told Forum 18 News Service. "We're ready to fight to the end." The authorities have made a series of hostile moves against the church, including fining Yurevich 150 times the minimum monthly wage for organising religious worship without state permission. On 14 March, New Life received a letter from Minsk city administration denying the church re-registration under Belarus' religion law. The letter claimed that re-registration was not possible because the church building is designated as a cowshed, the church has allegedly given insufficient information about the election procedure of the church council chairman, and the basic forms of church activity are allegedly not given in line with the requirements of the 2002 religion law.

The charismatic New Life congregation in the Belarusian capital Minsk is holding services with a borrowed diesel generator after the authorities cut off the electricity supply to their building – a disused cowshed - on 4 March, church administrator Vasily Yurevich told Forum 18 News Service from the city on 15 March. The electricity cut-off came a day after the state energy inspectorate surveyed the building by order of Minsk's senior religious affairs official, Alla Ryabitseva. "We won't leave the property," Yurevich pledged to Forum 18. "We're ready to fight to the end."

After New Life bought the disused cowshed in 2002, all official agencies approved requests to change the designated land usage to that of a church except for the religious affairs department of Minsk city administration. Without this approval, the 600-strong congregation was refused re-registration at the address of the cowshed as soon as the religion law's 16 November 2004 deadline for compulsory re-registration expired. On 30 December the church received a first official warning after Yurevich was on 28 December fined 150 times the minimum monthly wage for organising religious worship without state permission (see F18News 29 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=480 and 25 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=498). Under the 2002 religion law, a second warning would be sufficient to ban the church.

Yurevich said that New Life's pastor, Vyacheslav Goncharenko, had been informed that he would now face charges of repeatedly organising illegal worship when he was last summoned by local police on 9 March (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516). A 1 March hearing at Minsk's Moscow district court – at which Pastor Goncharenko was accused of organising an illegal religious service - was unexpectedly adjourned by the judge for further investigation, Yurevich told Forum 18, and it remains unclear when the next hearing will take place.

After leaving the courthouse on 1 March, approximately 100 church members transferred to the next-door offices of Moscow district administration, where they were granted a 50-minute audience with its assistant for religious affairs, Nina Gordeyuk. A recording of the at times heated meeting appears on the church's website.

Addressing New Life members, Gordeyuk maintained that re-registration at the cowshed had not been approved due to long-term general construction plans for the area "in which neither cowshed nor prayer house appear." The plans have already approved by the country's president Aleksandr Lukashenko, she added. "The administration is unable to change anything now and give you the right to reconstruct the building." Gordeyuk also maintained that she could not allow such a large congregation to gather at the building because this was not in keeping with its designated usage, and the state was responsible for the safety of worshippers.

In response, Yurevich accused Gordeyuk of only latterly starting to talk about long-term city construction plans after speaking to Minsk's senior religious affairs official, Alla Ryabitseva: "In two years of correspondence there wasn't a single word about it" (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516). He also rejected Gordeyuk's expression of concern for worshippers' welfare, pointing out that Moscow district administration had earlier withdrawn permission for the church to meet at a house of culture after 18 months without incident.

While remarking that she was "not defending Ryabitseva now," Gordeyuk replied that the authorities had been quite right to evict the church from houses of culture and cinemas throughout Minsk, since these had "ceased to function as cultural institutions." She

insisted that the state was not trying to target New Life: "If we wanted, we could file for the liquidation of your church, but we don't want to do that because it affects a large group of people. We don't want an international scandal."

One member of the church, Lyudmila Yakimovich, pointed out that the congregation had earlier received letters from various state agencies, including the district architecture committee, which stated clearly that the authorities were not opposed to the construction of a house of worship on the site of the cowshed, but that this permission was subsequently rescinded. "So on the one hand we do fit into the city plan technically, but on the other hand we can't build because we are 'different'," she remarked. "This is a political decision against the church."

Gordeyuk claimed to be unaware of the documentation mentioned by Yakimovich and requested copies. Despite the impossibility of altering the city construction plans mentioned in her introduction, she claimed later on in the meeting that there was only one outstanding issue – "changing the designated usage of the premises" - and suggested that the church resolve this with the architecture committee. As an interim solution, she recommended re-registration at the church's previous legal address.

Alluding to the fact that, under the 2002 religion law, re-registration at a legal address is not accompanied by the right to worship there unless it is a purpose-built house of worship, Pastor Goncharenko responded that there was technically no difference between the legal address suggested by Gordeyuk - a workshop - and the cowshed. "It would be easy for you to help us by giving us two documents – one approving services on the territory of the cowshed, one allowing re-registration at the office there," he said. Goncharenko concluded by reminding Gordeyuk that New Life had attracted large sums from abroad for clinics and children's homes through its four social organisations: "All this happens for the benefit of your secular society - please allow us to do what God has called us to do."

Yurevich also told Forum 18 that on 14 March New Life received a letter from Minsk city administration in response to its 10 February demand for permission to use the cowshed as a church and to reconstruct it, as well as re-registration at its address. Dated 28 February, this document gives three reasons why re-registration was denied - the designated usage of the church's building as cowshed; allegedly insufficient information provided about the election procedure of the church council chairman; the basic forms of church activity allegedly not given in line with the requirements of the 2002 religion law.

The letter also insists that reconstruction of the cowshed is impossible because "there is no provision for a house of worship on the given territory" and notes that worship services continue to take place at the site despite Yurevich's fine and official warning. "Minsk city administration will continue to act in accordance with Belarusian law," the letter concludes. (END)

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

A printer-friendly map of Belarus is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=belaru>

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