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RUSSIA: Police and fire inspector try to close JW Congress

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Jehovah's Witnesses have told Forum 18 News Service that they can see a pattern of obstruction to their regional congresses. This month (August 2005), for example, an Arkhangelsk newspaper asked "Is there really anything to stop Jehovahists from killing hundreds of people - in Arkhangelsk, for example - in the name of a deity or some crazy idea?" Two attempts to rent buildings for a regional congress in the city were thwarted. At the third venue, police stepped onto the stage demanding that all 714 delegates leave "in view of the threat of terrorist attacks." Police then began to conduct a search, and a fire department inspector announced that the building was unsafe. When Jehovah's Witnesses refused to leave, the fire inspector ordered the stage lighting and then the entire electricity supply to be switched off. A Jehovah's Witness speaker continued by torchlight and the police couldn't search the building in darkness, so power was switched back on. The fire inspector then ordered the building's closure. Arkhangelsk regional public prosecutor's office told Forum 18 that they are investigating the Jehovah's Witnesses' complaint.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia are beginning to observe a pattern of obstruction to their annual regional congresses, a spokesman for the organisation has told Forum 18 News Service. "The modus operandi is always the same," remarked Christian Presber on 12 August. "Negative press articles and local Orthodox clergy lay the groundwork by putting pressure on state officials, who then give pseudo-reasons to close a convention down." One such case occurred recently in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg (see F18News 8 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=601).

In the northern city of Arkhangelsk [Arkhangel'sk], Jehovah's Witnesses' originally signed a contract to use premises belonging to Rossiya Physical Education and Sports Trade Union Society from 5-7 August 2005, Presber told Forum 18, but received notice from the Society's director three days before the congress was due to take place that the building would not be available due to an incomplete sewerage system. Failing to win an arbitration court challenge to this unilateral cancellation of the contract, the Jehovah's Witnesses then signed two further contracts with smaller venues, he said, but the director of one cancelled her agreement later the same day.

On 3 August Arkhangelsk-based weekly newspaper Pravda Severo-Zapada ran an article detailing last year's court ban on the Moscow community of Jehovah's Witnesses (see F18News 29 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=289) and likening the organisation to Aum Sinrikyo, the Japanese religious group convicted of releasing nerve gas into Tokyo's underground system in 1995. "Is there really anything to stop Jehovahists from killing hundreds of people - in Arkhangelsk, for example - in the name of a deity or some crazy idea?" the newspaper asked. "In our view, the Witnesses' ideology is close to being totalitarian and deserves thorough investigation by the security services."

When the congress commenced at the third venue – Solombala Arts Centre - a police officer stepped onto the stage following the opening prayer, took the microphone from the congress chairman and demanded that all 714 delegates leave the building "in view of the threat of terrorist attacks," Presber told Forum 18. While the congress resumed an hour later, he said, police began to search the premises, and a fire department inspector announced that they were unsafe. When the Jehovah's Witnesses refused to leave the Centre, the fire inspector reportedly ordered one of its employees to switch off the stage lighting, and - when a Jehovah's Witness elder nevertheless continued to address the delegates - the entire electricity supply. Since the speaker continued by torchlight and the police were unable to conduct their search in darkness, electricity was restored after a few minutes, said Presber, but the fire inspector then drew up an official order closing the building.

While a secretary at Arkhangelsk regional public prosecutor's office confirmed to Forum 18 on 16 August that an investigator was dealing with the Jehovah's Witnesses' complaint about the curtailment of their congress, he was not available for comment.

Although not aborted, two other Jehovah's Witness regional congresses have also been subject to significant disruption recently. In the southern Urals city of Orenburg, Jehovah's Witnesses anticipated problems when the director of a philharmonic hall they had agreed to rent tried to persuade them to cancel a week before their 12-14 August congress. Consequently, according to Christian Presber, the Jehovah's Witnesses paid for a private security inspection of the hall by senior police officers on the eve of the congress and did not admit anyone to the building the following morning except for the approximately 1,000 delegates. Although more junior police officers ordered an evacuation of the building several hours later on the grounds that they had been alerted to a bomb, said Presber, the Jehovah's Witnesses refused to leave, suspecting that they would not be re-admitted.

The Orenburg congress thus went ahead while the officers patrolled the building and searched delegates' bags, Presber told Forum 18. In addition, he said, a local official arrived to claim - erroneously - that the Jehovah's Witnesses needed permission from Orenburg municipal administration to hold the event: "This second claim – the first being the alleged bomb threat – demonstrates that state officials were actively searching for reasons to shut the convention down."

On 15 August Christian Presber told Forum 18 that, after Jehovah's Witness representatives made telephone calls to various local administration departments querying the police action, officers drew up a document later on 12 August stating that they had found no evidence of a security threat. The remainder of the Orenburg congress passed without incident.

In Kokhma (Ivanovo region) Jehovah's Witnesses concluded a contract with Rekord Stadium for a 22-24 July congress, Presber told Forum 18 on 20 July. In a 15 July letter viewed by Forum 18, however, mayor of Kokhma Vyacheslav Kashin maintained to the Jehovah's Witnesses that the municipal authorities "cannot allow" the congress due to a children's sporting event to be held at the stadium the same weekend. Told by the stadium administration that no such event was scheduled, the Jehovah's Witnesses wrote to Mayor Kashin pointing out that they held a valid contract, Presber told Forum 18, but in an 18 July letter the mayor again informed them that it was "not possible" to offer the premises for the congress.

Speaking to Forum 18 on 22 July, however, Jehovah's Witness lawyer Denis Vladimirov said that several thousand delegates had entered the Rekord Stadium unobstructed that Friday morning. Although Mayor Kashin came to object angrily soon afterwards, Vladimirov continued, he decided not to block the event following further discussion with Jehovah's Witness representatives. On the evening of 24 July he informed Forum 18 that the rest of the congress had gone ahead as scheduled.

In 2003 Jehovah's Witnesses were blocked by police from holding three congresses in Russia's southern Stavropol region (see F18News 29 November 2004) and in July 2004 they were forced to abandon their congress in Yekaterinburg (see F18News 27 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=377). In April 2004 the local authorities in the neighbouring Urals region of Tyumen cancelled a 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). However, similarly large-scale Jehovah's Witness congresses held in St Petersburg and Moscow in June and July 2005 passed without incident.

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509

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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