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BELARUS: Religious freedom lawyer jailed

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Following Baptist pastor Georgi Vyazovsky's completion of a 10 day jail term, religious freedom lawyer Sergei Shavtsov has been jailed, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Shavtsov organised a Christian business leaders seminar, after being denied official permission, and was detained after police raided the seminar. His wife Dina Shavtsova told Forum 18 "Why shouldn't they hold a seminar? All it was about was a Biblical view of history." Dina Shavtsova said that her husband's sentence – although on identical charges – is not directly connected with Pastor Vyazovsky's. "But the authorities are punishing the same kind of activity – unapproved religious events." Vitali Misevets, head of the Frunze district Ideology Department, claimed to Forum 18 that "It's not absurd to deny permission for such a meeting. How do we know what 35 people were going to be discussing?" Fears have been expressed that Pentecostal Bishop Sergei Tsvor will be jailed on similar charges.

Eleven days after Baptist pastor Georgi Vyazovsky completed a ten-day prison sentence for leading unregistered religious activity, a second Protestant was detained and sentenced on similar charges. Sergei Shavtsov, who went ahead and organised a seminar of Christian business leaders in a private cafe in the capital Minsk after official permission was denied, was detained after police raided the seminar on 24 March. "The court offered Sergei a choice of a massive fine or ten days in prison – he chose prison," his wife Dina Shavtsova told Forum 18 News Service from Minsk on 27 March. "Why shouldn't they hold a seminar? All it was about was a Biblical view of history."

Dina Shavtsova said her husband's sentence – although on identical charges – is not directly connected with Pastor Vyazovsky's. "But the authorities are punishing the same kind of activity – unapproved religious events."

Vyazovsky was jailed for 10 days earlier this month [March] and there are fears that Pentecostal Bishop Sergei Tsvor of Minsk will be jailed on the same charges (see F18News 13 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=743).

Shavtsova said the Christian Business Initiative, a registered social organisation which supports Christians in business, had originally intended to hold the seminar in the Christ for the Nations Christian college in Minsk's Frunze district. Under the tight controls on religious meetings, the authorities claim such events need specific permission, so the organisers sought such permission.

Vitali Misevets, head of the Frunze district ideology department, who on 17 March refused official permission to hold the seminar at the college, said the organisers failed to meet all the requirements of the law, including providing written permission from the Internal Affairs Department and the Emergency Situations Department. "It's not absurd to deny permission for such a meeting," he told Forum 18 from Minsk on 27 March. "How do we know what 35 people were going to be discussing?"

Misevets insisted that in rejecting the application he was merely fulfilling the law on mass meetings and events. "We're a law-governed state – this is what the law demands so this is what I need to have before I can give permission." He claimed he had nothing against the holding of such religious meetings.

The seminar went ahead in a rented private cafe in Minsk's Lenin district from Wednesday 22 to Friday 24 March. "The first two days there was no problem," Shavtsova reported. But on the Friday three police officers and one KGB officer arrived, claiming the seminar was illegal as no official permission had been granted. The officers locked all 35 or so participants in the cafe for an hour, while two Protestant pastors present, who were suspected of being the organisers, were taken to the local police station for interrogation. Police took identity details for all the other participants, who were later freed.

Shavtsov – who was not present when the seminar was raided – soon arrived and said he was the organiser. The two pastors were then freed, but he was brought to trial later that day at Lenin district court under Article 167 part 1 of the Code of Administrative Violations. This punishes "carrying out unauthorised mass activities". Within 20 minutes he was found guilty and offered the choice of paying a fine of 4,650,000 Belarusian roubles (14,311 Norwegian kroner, 1,798 Euros or 2,162 US dollars) or serving ten days in prison. On choosing prison, he was immediately sent to the prison on Okrestina street, where many opposition political demonstrators are now being held. He is due to be released on 3 April.

No-one was available at the Lenin district police on 27 March to explain why a peaceful religious meeting was raided. Nor was

anyone available to comment at Lenin district court as to why Shavtsov had been punished for organising the seminar.

Dina Shavtsova told Forum 18 she did not feel the harsh punishment for a peaceful religious meeting was related to current government nervousness in the wake of the 19 March presidential elections, which opposition activists claim were rigged. "The authorities in any case look at Protestants as an organised group that presents a danger."

Sergei Shavtsov is a Christian lawyer who has long been involved in religious freedom work. He helped compile the August 2002 "White Book", a collection of documents and articles about the adoption of amendments to the religion law in 2002 which brought in drastic restrictions on all religious activity. He also acts as legal consultant to several national Protestant Churches.

Several religious leaders who took part in or observed opposition demonstrations in Minsk in the wake of the election are among the hundreds who have been detained by the Belarusian authorities.

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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