

18 April 2006

BELARUS: "The state does not interfere in the activity of religious organisations"

By Felix Corley, Forum 18, and Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

A Pentecostal leader in Belarus, Gennady Akhramovich, is facing a fine for organising a Bible study group within his congregation, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. However, Tatyana Zhitko, head of the local Ideology Department, has refused to say why this is happening. "Why are you calling me?" she complained. "I don't know your publication and I'm not prepared to give you any information." Akhramovich's New Generation Church is facing state threats to its place of worship, like the Minsk-based New Life Church which is now facing a forced sale of its worship building to Minsk City Property Department. Meanwhile, two Protestants jailed for illegal religious activity have been freed. And despite the expulsion of Catholic priest Fr Robert Krzywicki, Vladimir Lameko of the state Religious Affairs Committee has told Fr Robert's parishioners that "the state does not interfere in the activity of religious organisations."

The administration of the town of Baranovichi [Baranavichy] in western Belarus, is trying to fine a local Pentecostal leader for organising a Bible study group within his congregation, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. Tatyana Zhitko, head of the Ideology Department of the town administration has refused to tell Forum 18 why the Administrative Commission is doing this. "Why are you calling me?" she complained on 12 April. "I don't know your publication and I'm not prepared to give you any information." Protestant churches have borne the brunt of increased use in recent months of the Administrative Violations Code to restrict the activity of religious communities.

In the wake of a police raid on New Generation Church at the beginning of 2006, local officials accused Gennady Akhramovich, who chairs the church's council, of organising a study group of eleven church members without registering its statutes. In a report dated 22 February, officials said this violated Article 193 of the Administrative Violations Code - a Soviet-era provision punishing the foundation and leadership of an unregistered religious congregation or a group within a religious community not connected with the performance of religious rituals with a fine of up to five times the minimum monthly wage (i.e. up to 120,000 Belarusian Roubles, 357 Norwegian Kroner, 45 Euros or 53 US Dollars).

However, at its hearing on 6 April at which Akhramovich set out his position, the Administrative Commission postponed further consideration of the case for another two weeks, complaining that it had not had time to prepare properly.

Akhramovich argues that the study group was not a separate organisation but an integral part of the church's work, since its aim was "in-depth Bible study, in particular such issues as Biblical foundations of the family and marriage, the nature of faith, prayer, the Holy Spirit, the Church." He maintains that organising such study groups is within the competence of his church as outlined in its statutes and as a registered religious community under the country's 2002 Religion Law. Under Belarus' tight web of restrictions on all religious activity - and in defiance of the country's international human rights commitments - the government maintains that all religious activity without official approval is illegal.

While New Generation Church has managed to re-register under the 2002 Law, it has encountered difficulties acquiring a place of worship. Last year Pastor Leonid Voronenko told Forum 18 that, although his 150-strong congregation bought a 443-square-metre [530-square-yard] warehouse in 1997 with the intention of converting it into a church, the town authorities have refused to allow the designated purpose of the building to be changed or to give the church full rights over the land beneath it.

In long-running correspondence on the issue between the church and Baranovichi Municipal Executive Committee seen by Forum 18, the latter's chairman Mikhail Pavlov explains in July 1997 that conversion of the warehouse is "inexpedient". His successor Viktor Dichkovsky wrote to Pastor Voronenko in August 2004 that there was "no basis" to alter the building and warned that if the designated usage of the plot of land was not complied with - in this case, storage of goods and products - then the church's right to use it would be terminated in accordance with the Land Code. With the help of public pressure, New Generation Church has so far managed to resist state threats to seal and demolish the building (see F18News 28 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=619).

A fellow Full Gospel Association congregation in a similar predicament is the Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church. On 18

April its administrator Vasily Yurevich told Forum 18 that the church has just received a court summons from Minsk City Economic Court to attend a 24 April preliminary hearing on the forced sale of the church's worship building to Minsk City Property Department. Currently, he remarked, the church is still considering its response, but is resolved "not to sell our church building at any price." A copy of the summons has been seen by Forum 18.

In late October 2005 New Life Church lost its challenge in the same court against Minsk City Executive Committee's 17 August instruction curtailing the church's land rights and ordering the sale of its worship building, a disused cowshed it purchased in 2002 (see F18News 7 December 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=700). The Executive Committee's decision was based on the church's alleged violation of Article 49, Part 4 of the Land Code, which states that rights to land may be curtailed if it is not used in accordance with its designation.

The 2002 Religion Law requires state permission for religious gatherings in premises not specially designed for worship, but the Minsk municipal authorities have consistently refused to grant both this - on the grounds that the building is a cowshed - as well as permission to change the designated usage of the building and reconstruct it as a church (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516).

Two Protestants have recently been freed after each serving ten days in prison for religious activity the government regards – against international human rights standards - as illegal. Sergei Shavtsov, a religious rights lawyer who was imprisoned for ten days on charges of organising an unapproved Christian seminar in a private cafe, was freed at the end of his sentence on 3 April (see F18News 27 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=750). "Conditions in prison were not too bad," he told Forum 18 from Minsk on 12 April, "though of course it was not up to the standard of foreign prisons."

On 5 April Vladimir Bukanov, a Reformed Baptist pastor based in Gatovo (Minsk region), told Forum 18 that neither his congregation nor that of Pastor Georgi Vyazovsky had encountered any restriction since Vyazovsky's release from prison on 13 March (see F18News 6 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=737).

Also facing charges for leading unapproved home worship is the Pentecostal bishop of Minsk region, Sergei Tsvor, but as he told Forum 18, he knows of no further development since the 9 March postponement of a court hearing to consider his case (see F18News 13 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=743). "They told me to wait for a summons," he remarked to Forum 18 on 12 April, "but all has gone quiet."

Meanwhile, Christians and political opponents of President Aleksandr Lukashenko, detained by police during election demonstrations in Minsk and elsewhere, are now gradually being released from prison. Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers found that the 19 March presidential election "failed to meet OSCE commitments for democratic elections" and that "arbitrary abuse of state power, obviously designed to protect the incumbent President, went far beyond acceptable practice."

Freed on 28 March, Kristina Shatikova from the town of Mogilev [Mahilyow], told the opposition news website Charter 97 that members of the OMON special riot police confiscated Bibles from some female demonstrators as they arrested them. She claimed that when they asked for their Bibles back, the OMON members laughed and threatened to rape them. Members of some Christian churches took part in the demonstrations and a number were detained for up to two weeks.

In the wake of the expulsion from Belarus last December of the Catholic parish priest of Borisov, Polish citizen Fr Robert Krzywicki, a group of his parishioners wrote to the government's Religious Affairs Committee demanding that he be allowed to return (see F18News 13 January 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=715). In his 22 March response, however, Committee deputy chairman Vladimir Lameko said the complaint had been sent on to the Minsk regional executive committee as this body had originally given Fr Krzywicki permission to serve in the parish. At the same time, Lameko pointed out that, as the Catholic leadership holds the exclusive right to name priests to parishes, Cardinal Kazimierz Swiatek appointed Fr Zbigniew Grigorzewicz to the Borisov parish. "The state does not interfere in the activity of religious organisations."

Local journalist Viktoriya Ravinskaya wrote on a Borisov website borisov-e.info on 28 March that the parishioners said the response had been as they had predicted. Maintaining that Lameko had confused the consequence of Fr Robert's departure – Fr Zbigniew's appointment – with its cause, they pointed out that the cardinal was forced to name another priest as Fr Robert was "no longer able to fulfil his duties because of his expulsion from Belarus".

On 30 March Ravinskaya wrote on the same website that a response to parishioners from the Minsk regional executive committee similarly pointed out that religious organisations were solely responsible for appointments to parishes and that Fr Zbigniew Grigorzewicz had in this way replaced Fr Robert Krzywicki. "But that is unfair," she reported parishioners as saying, "the authorities in practice deprived Fr Robert of the possibility of conducting religious activity in our parish and on the territory of Belarus (...) the regional executive committee is trying to evade responsibility by referring to a Foreign Ministry decision." The Borisov parishioners now intend to ask the Foreign Ministry for an explanation of why Fr Robert's visa was not prolonged.

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>

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY