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MOLDOVA: Is children's camp "normal" or "unsanitary"?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (https://www.forum18.org)

After attempts by health officials and police with guns and truncheons to close a children's camp, Baptists have denied to Forum 18 News Service claims that the camp is "unsanitary." "The authorities say there are bad conditions for the children at the camp – after they themselves cut off the water," Baptist leader Ivan Fonaryuk told Forum 18. But local Mayor Iurie Onofrichuk claimed that "there's the danger of an epidemic." The children's camp has been running since 2002, and has had good relations with the local Sanitary Epidemiological Service. A German Baptist at the camp told Forum 18 that "compared with homes and other facilities in the district there is no great difference – or perhaps the camp is better." The appointment of a new local health official marked the start of the Baptist's problems – despite a senior police official, who inspected the camp, reporting that conditions are "normal". Police are currently posted at the gates, to try to stop Baptists entering. It remains unclear why local authorities are this year trying to close the camp.

Baptists have vehemently rejected claims of unsanitary conditions at a children's camp near the Moldovan capital Chisinau, made by health officials who, with police armed with guns and truncheons, seek its closure. "The police tried again today to break up the camp and drive out the children," Baptist leader Ivan Fonaryuk told Forum 18 News Service on 31 July from the village of Vadul-del-Voda, where the camp is being held. "The authorities say there are bad conditions for the children at the camp – after they themselves cut off the water!" But Vadul-del-Voda's Mayor Iurie Onofrichuk rejected all the Baptists' accusations. "They can say what they like – it's on their conscience," he told Forum 18 from the village on 31 July. "But the sanitary conditions don't meet our norms. There's the danger of an epidemic."

After days of harassment, the police broke up the morning service at the camp on Monday 31 July, leaving the children frightened and crying, one of the camp organisers, Yuri Shevchenko, told Forum 18 that evening. "The police promised to pounce at any time the following day." He said police are posted at the gates, to try to stop any Baptists arriving to give the camp organisers their support.

Insisting to Forum 18 that the children "must have proper conditions", Mayor Onofrichuk complained that they have to eat food cooked in the open air - an allegation the Baptists reject. Asked whether the alleged unsanitary conditions at the camp arose because the authorities themselves had turned off the water and electricity, he refused to answer. He also refused to say how many other children's camps in the area had been inspected to check that conditions met sanitary norms. He then declined all further questions, saying he had an office full of people waiting for his attention.

Ion Cebotar, Assistant to the head of Chisinau's Sanitary Epidemiological Service Yuri Pynzar, whose arrival in office a month ago coincided with the start of the complaints against the Baptists, also insists that the camp does not offer "proper conditions" for the children. "We inspected all children's camps and this was the only one not meeting proper standards," Cebotar told Forum 18 from Chisinau on 1 August. "Other Protestant camps are OK."

He repeatedly claimed he did not know who had turned off the water and electricity supply to the camp, but insisted the Sanitary Epidemiological Service's complaints went beyond the absence of water and electricity. Cebotar claimed his Service had given the Baptists the reasons for ordering the camp's closure in writing. However, he refused absolutely to outline any reasons for the camp's closure to Forum 18, or to answer any more questions, and then put the phone down.

However, camp organiser Shevchenko complained that improvements to the site that had to be made – as set out in Pynzar's 26 July letter - were so demanding that it is impossible for the Baptists to fulfil them. "This was done deliberately so that they could then use this to close us down," he told Forum 18.

Fonaryuk told Forum 18 that over the five years the camp has been operating all twelve of his children have stayed there. "No children – whether mine or anyone else's - suffered any illness over all those years," he insisted to Forum 18. He said the three-month camp for church members' children is due to run until the beginning of September. The camp, which holds about 150 children at any one time, is staffed by church volunteers.

One Baptist from Germany who had visited the camp and was able to look over the whole facility said the local Baptists "have done

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their best" to make the camp as clean and presentable as possible. "If you compare it with conditions in Western Europe, the standards are low," he told Forum 18 from Vadul-del-Voda on 31 July. "But compared with homes and other facilities in the district there is no great difference – or perhaps the camp is better."

The Baptists remain unsure why the authorities have used the Sanitary Epidemiological Service and the police to close the camp. "They think the camp is not right - they don't want it here," Fonaryuk told Forum 18. "They don't like the fact that we are Christians, though they don't say that openly." He also speculated that someone might want to profiteer from using the "valuable land" for other purposes.

Shevchenko told Forum 18 the Baptists are ready to discuss any reasonable requests the authorities might have, but that no such dialogue has been possible.

The Council of Churches Baptists – who refuse on principle to register with the authorities in former Soviet countries - are from a number of congregations, and have held camps on the rented site in the picturesque village of Vadul-del-Voda, 20 kilometres (12 miles) from the capital, since 2001. They say they have over the years themselves repaired the building, its roof and the kitchen, and even installed hot and cold running water. They reported that, in previous years, whenever medical officials from the Sanitary Epidemiological Service have pointed out faults needing correction they have made the repairs demanded.

The Baptists claim that problems began in mid-July with Pynzar's appointment as new head of the Sanitary Epidemiological Service. Camp organisers were summoned to the mayor's office and to the police, where they were told to close down the camp and send the children home.

Pressure was stepped up on 26 July, when health official Pynzar and Mayor Onofrichuk arrived, accompanied by a group of television journalists. Without showing any documents, the journalists started filming as the officials angrily asked why the children had not been sent home. An hour after they left, the Baptists told Forum 18, three unidentified officials in civilian clothes arrived, also demanding that the children be sent home at once.

However, the Baptists say that later that day a more senior police official came from the capital, saying he had been told a "concentration camp for children" was operating in Vadul-del-Voda. After viewing the camp the official reported to his superiors that conditions in the camp were "normal". While the Baptists were still talking to the official, armed police arrived, including one holding an automatic weapon. The official from Chisinau sent them off the camp premises. The Baptists say that later that evening, Pynzar arrived with the village's Deputy Mayor, who swore at the camp organisers in the presence of the children and told them they should be in prison.

As the organisers refused to close the camp, local officials cut off electricity and water supplies to the camp.

In a 28 July complaint to Moldova's President, Vladimir Voronin, the children's parents pleaded with him to allow their children to continue their holiday "to praise God together" without fear of police officers with guns and truncheons.

Shevchenko said the Council of Churches Baptists have faced minor harassment from Russian Orthodox priests in recent years, but no significant pressure from the authorities in government-controlled parts of Moldova. "This is the first such large-scale problem," he told Forum 18.

Members of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, as well as Muslims, have also faced harassment from the authorities in recent years (see eg. F18News 26 July 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=616).

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

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