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BELARUS: Charismatic church's "time has run out," official claims

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

The authorities in Belarus' capital Minsk think they are already legally entitled to take the building used for worship by New Life Church, Forum 18 News Service has discovered. Officials have confirmed to Forum 18 that Minsk city has transferred money for New Life's building into the church's bank account, despite New Life's strong opposition. The church continues to oppose state attempts to take its building, and insists that the price offered is 35 times lower than the building's true value. Aleksandr Kazyatnikov of Minsk Territorial State Property Fund thinks that New Life had until Thursday 5 October to get out of their building. "Their time has run out," he told Forum 18. Church lawyer Sergei Lukanin thinks that Monday 9 October is when the authorities could begin to try to take the building. However, Nina Gordeyuk of Minsk city's Moscow District Administration thinks that the payment process is not complete. Once complete, she said, officials will meet with New Life's Pastor and the head of the state concern due to receive the building "to discuss the matter further." She was unable to say when this will be.

The authorities in Belarus' capital Minsk think they are already legally entitled to take the building used for worship by the charismatic New Life Church, Forum 18 News Service has discovered. Aleksandr Kazyatnikov of Minsk Territorial State Property Fund told Forum 18 on 6 October that his department transferred the sum of money to be exchanged for the building to New Life's bank account on Monday 25 September. According to a 21 July verdict by Minsk City Economic Court endorsing the building's forced sale, New Life has up to 10 days following the money transfer in which to vacate the premises – or, in line with Kazyatnikov's reckoning, by 5 October. "Their time has run out," he remarked to Forum 18.

New Life, however, considers Friday 29 September to be the date upon which the money was transferred, making Monday 9 October the first day upon which the state authorities could take concrete steps to seize the building, church member and lawyer Sergei Lukanin told Forum 18 on 5 October. Being the state department that filed suit for the building, Minsk Territorial State Property Fund should initiate such steps, he explained. "First they must suggest to us that we leave voluntarily, then, only after we refuse, do they have the right to turn to court bailiffs, who have the right to invite the police if they meet with opposition."

New Life is resolutely opposed to the transfer. Lukanin told Forum 18 that it has requested permission for a public demonstration on 21 October and that an as yet undetermined number of church members will soon go on hunger strike inside their worship building in protest at its seizure. In addition to disputing the forced sale of the premises, the church claims that the price paid for them - 37,581,476 Belarusian roubles (108,656 Norwegian Kroner, 13,762 Euros, or 17,497 US Dollars) – is 35 times lower than its true value (see F18News 22 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=844). New Life thinks that this price would only buy a room in a communal flat with a shared kitchen.

Aleksandr Kazyatnikov commented to Forum 18 that New Life "doesn't want to co-operate" and confirmed that the authorities would have to demand the transfer of the disputed building if the church refused to relinquish it. However, he also said that he did not know when the authorities would take over the building. The administration of Minsk's Moscow District – where the building is situated – is now entrusted with the task of facilitating the transfer, he maintained: "It's their problem now."

Nina Gordeyuk of Moscow District Administration also confirmed to Forum 18 on 6 October that the sum of money for the building has been transferred to the church, but suggested that the payment process is not complete as the premises have not yet been formally transferred onto the balance of her department. Once this takes place, she said, its officials will meet with New Life's Pastor Goncharenko and the head of the state concern due to receive the building "to discuss the matter further." Gordeyuk was unable to state when this would be, however, commenting only that "we will proceed in accordance with Belarusian law."

Arguing that New Life's building – a spacious, modern barn-like structure - is technically a cowshed, Minsk officials have refused to grant the 1000-strong congregation permission to use it for services. The state authorities simultaneously refuse to allow the church to legalise its position by changing the building's designation to that of a house of worship. Minsk's top religious affairs official has claimed to Forum 18 that this is impossible due to the city Development Plan (see F18News 21 February 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=516). However, an official in charge of executing the Development Plan recently told a Minsk court that it was technically possible to site a house of worship for New Life "anywhere in the city", but that this depended upon permission from the religious affairs department (see F18News 28 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=819).

New Life has been worshipping at its disused cowshed ever since being barred from renting a local house of culture in September 2004. As church administrator Vasili Yurevich told public prosecution officials in December 2004, the congregation was earlier refused requests to rent other public facilities by district administrations throughout Minsk (see F18News 16 December 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=477). The church's continued use of its building for services has resulted in multiple large fines (see most recently F18News 17 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=832), in addition to the authorities' decision to confiscate the building. (END)

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

A survey of the religious freedom decline in the eastern part of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) area is at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=806.

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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