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BELARUS: Reports that US citizens deported for religious activity "a misunderstanding"

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Illegal religious activity is not the reason why a group of US English-language teachers were deported from Belarus earlier this month, Forum 18 News Service has been told. According to recent media reports, unauthorised religious activity led to one of two police warnings that formed the grounds for their deportation. An Interior Ministry spokesman even told one news agency that students were found singing religious songs and with Bibles on their desks when police raided what was supposedly a seminar in conversational English at a Baptist church in Mogilev. The region's religious affairs official, however, has told Forum 18 that the Americans did not violate the 2002 Religion Law. The head of the charity which invited the group also insisted to Forum 18 that its activity was not religious and that teaching took place at the church simply because there was no rental fee. Elsewhere in Mogilev region, an Israeli rabbi is trying to overturn the state's decision not to renew his religious work permit.

Despite media reports to the contrary, seven US citizens deported from Belarus on 16 February were not barred for illegal religious activity, both a state representative and the director of the local charity that invited them have insisted to Forum 18 News Service.

"It's a misunderstanding," Dmitri Kontsevenko, the director of Stefanus, a social organisation in the eastern city of Mogilev [Mahilyow], told Forum 18 on 23 February. "Our organisation is not religious and there was no religious component to the Americans' teaching – there just happened to be religious literature at the church where they were holding English classes."

This was echoed by Mogilev's top regional religious affairs official on 26 February. "The Americans were not deported for religious activity," Valeri Sidorenko insisted to Forum 18. "They did not violate the Law on Freedom of Conscience [the 2002 Religion Law]."

According to a 16 February report posted on various Belarusian websites, a group of ten US volunteers began giving free English seminars on the premises of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Mogilev on 5 February. On 9 February, it stated, local police warned them that they were conducting illegal religious activity. On 13 February each was reportedly fined 31,000 Belarusian Roubles [88 Norwegian Kroner, 11 Euros, or 14 US Dollars] for illegal teaching activity, and a local Migration Department informed them of their deportation on 15 February.

Also on 16 February, Associated Press reported that the ten Americans had been deported "for allegedly singing religious songs and reading spiritual literature." When police raided what was supposed to be a seminar in conversational English, according to Oleg Slepchenko, an Interior Ministry spokesman, they found Bibles on the tables and participants singing religious songs instead of talking. According to the report, the Americans' deportation followed after the authorities subsequently found them repeating the alleged violations.

According to the Russian religious affairs website Portal-Credo.ru, the Americans were fined for illegal teaching activity and accused of violating regulations governing the presence of foreign citizens on Belarusian territory during the 9 February raid. The second, 13 February, warning was issued for illegal religious activity, the website maintained, adding that two official warnings are sufficient for the deportation of a foreign citizen from Belarus.

Dmitri Kontsevenko of Stefanus confirmed to Forum 18 that the first warning was for illegal religious activity and the second for illegal teaching activity. He also clarified that three of the Americans were obliged to leave Belarus following the first warning due to the death of a relative, so that only seven were in fact deported. Mogilev City Public Prosecutor is currently considering Stefanus' and the Americans' formal complaints against the police action, he said.

Kontsevenko also explained that Stefanus is a social organisation that has "never had a religious component" but chose to hold its English lessons at the Baptist church because it had been offered to the charity free of charge. "Obviously I'm going to choose the place where the rent is lowest," he remarked to Forum 18. He also pointed out that under Belarusian law it is not illegal to offer the use of one's premises free of charge, nor for a religious organisation to have religious literature at its premises. In this instance, however, the charity director stressed that the Americans "bore no relation whatsoever to that literature – and they did not circulate

it."

According to regional religious affairs official Valeri Sidorenko, the Americans were deported for violating regulations on the presence of foreigners in Belarus "by conducting a teaching programme without a state licence" in Mogilev. Asked whether any unlawful religious activity had taken place nevertheless, he replied that he could not say for certain: "We didn't conduct the check-up – the police might have had some criticisms, but we have none." Sidorenko added that, judging by the materials he had seen about the incident, religious activity was not involved. He also pointed out that, under the 2002 Religion Law, everyone has the right to conduct religious activity individually. "We are peaceful people – we don't deport people just like that."

As an example of the state's supposedly tolerant stance in this regard, Sidorenko told Forum 18 that a foreign Jewish rabbi living in Mogilev region has been allowed to remain in the country even after his permission to conduct religious activity was not renewed last year due to his "illegal commercial activity."

Contacted on 27 February, Rabbi Boruch Lamdan confirmed that his permission to conduct religious activity was not renewed in September 2006, "but it's not true that I was conducting commercial activity." An Israeli citizen based in Bobruisk (Mogilev Region), Lamdan explained that when financial donations for charitable purposes were sent to him personally, the local authorities had insisted that he pay tax on them. This he did, but due to late payment he was deemed to have violated Belarusian law. "And so my permission to conduct religious activity wasn't renewed," the rabbi told Forum 18. He is currently trying to get the decision overturned.

Foreign religious workers invited by local religious communities of various confessions are increasingly being barred from Belarus (see F18News 18 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=856). Seven Polish Catholic priests and five nuns were forced out of Belarus at the end of 2006, apparently because of their high levels of religious activity, including youth and alcohol rehabilitation meetings open to all (see F18News 12 January 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=899). (END)

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=888.

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>

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

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY