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BELARUS: Three days' prison for Pentecostal pastor

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

One week after being fined for leading Sunday worship in John the Baptist Pentecostal Church in the capital Minsk, Pastor Antoni Bokun has again been punished for leading its 3 June communion service. The following evening (4 June), a court handed him a three-day prison term, making him the third person to be imprisoned in post-Soviet Belarus for religious activity. Local lawyer Sergei Lukanin told Forum 18 News Service that two police officers interrupted the Sunday communion service to arrest Bokun. In response to Bokun's second arrest, the imminent deportation of a Polish Pentecostal and other harassment of religious communities, 7,000 Christians attended a religious freedom prayer service on the evening of 3 June outside Grace Pentecostal Church in Minsk. Lukanin said the service was filmed from nearby buildings by people he assumed to be plain-clothes police. Participants drew up an appeal to President Aleksandr Lukashenko calling for the restrictive 2002 Religion Law to be brought into line with the Constitution. That same evening, state television channel ONT broadcast an item warning of the dangers of "neo-Pentecostal sects".

Pastor Antoni Bokun of the Minsk-based John the Baptist Pentecostal Church was handed down a three-day prison sentence yesterday evening (4 June) for leading worship without state permission at his home the previous morning, Forum 18 News Service has learned. After being detained during the 3 June Sunday Communion service, Pastor Bokun was held overnight at a local remand prison, local Christian lawyer Sergei Lukanin told Forum 18 on 4 June. As the 24 hours Bokun spent in detention following his arrest are considered part of the sentence, his release is due tomorrow afternoon (6 June).

Directed to the press office of Minsk's Central District Police Station on the morning of 4 June, Forum 18 was told that Pastor Bokun's case material was at Central District Court, where he would be tried shortly. The police spokeswoman refused to provide further details, including the charges against the pastor.

While such cases are normally heard the morning following overnight detention, Pastor Bokun was not sentenced until approximately 8.30 pm, Lukanin told Forum 18. Speaking from the courthouse, he explained that the cases of five students also charged with violating regulations for holding demonstrations or other mass meetings were being heard first, beginning at around 3pm. Apparently due to a crowd of some 100 people supporting the defendants, the police van escorting them twice approached the courthouse at approximately midday but drove away again, said Lukanin. The defendants were kept inside the metal van for the whole day, despite direct sun of approximately 30 degrees Centigrade. This led the lawyer to express concern that medical attention was not permitted for Bokun's high blood pressure.

According to Lukanin, two uniformed police, Major Aleksandr Radyukevich and Captain Yuri Kulinich, were present from the beginning of the 3 June Sunday service of John the Baptist Pentecostal Church. Having interrupted the Breaking of Bread (Communion), he said, they escorted Pastor Bokun to Minsk's Central District Police Station. "So the service had to go on without him." At the police station, Pastor Bokun was asked to sign a protocol admitting that he had violated Article 23.34 of the Administrative Violations Code. Bokun wrote that he had not violated the 1994 Belarusian Constitution, however, and that he believes the Demonstrations and Religion Laws to be unconstitutional.

Yesterday's sentence comes exactly a week after Pastor Bokun was detained overnight and given a heavy fine of 620,000 Belarusian roubles (1,740 Norwegian Kroner, 215 Euros or 290 US Dollars) for leading a similar service the previous Sunday (see F18News 28 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=964). Viewed by Forum 18, a copy of the 28 May court decision fining Pastor Bokun states that between 11am and 12.50pm on 27 May he "organised and led a mass religious event without permission". On that occasion, the court recognised his "acknowledgment of guilt, sincere remorse and the fact of a first offence" as extenuating circumstances.

On 29 May the head of the Pentecostal Union, Bishop Sergei Khomich, wrote to Minsk City Police Department expressing his concern at Pastor Bokun's first prosecution (see F18News 30 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=967). Also in response, his 2,500-strong Grace Pentecostal Church hosted a special prayer service for religious freedom at 6pm on 3 June. In particular, they prayed for the possibilities to hold services in residential and other premises and to have property formally redesignated for worship. The current restrictions cause particular problems for Protestant congregations (see F18News 29 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=965 and 30 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=966).

Some 7,000 people from different churches across Belarus attended the 3 June evening service, the lawyer Lukanin told Forum 18. As there was not enough room inside the church, the event was held outside – and filmed from nearby buildings by people who he assumed to be plain-clothes police. Joined by the leaders of the Baptist Union and the Full Gospel Association, Nikolai Sinkovets and Vyacheslav Goncharenko, he said, Bishop Khomich read out an appeal to President Aleksandr Lukashenko calling for the restrictive 2002 Religion Law to be brought into line with the Belarusian Constitution.

A 4 June Evangelical Belarusian Information Centre report estimated that some 5,000 were present at the service. It recounted how Bishop Goncharenko contrasted the freedom to preach of the early 1990s with restrictions later in the decade, telling those present, "Do not be silent!" and "Do not be afraid!" Pentecostal Assistant Bishop Sergei Tsvor, who preached at the 27 May service at which Pastor Bokun was arrested, reminded those present that the freedom of the early 1990s was not achieved lightly, but paid for by the sacrifices of many people who had "stood for truth until the end".

In addition to Pastor Bokun's second detention, several recent events led Lukanin to remark to Forum 18 on 4 June that "the authorities have declared war on us". An active Polish member of Pastor Bokun's church, Jaroslaw Lukasik, faces deportation in a few days (see F18News 30 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=967). Viewed by Forum 18, a copy of a 27 May protocol against him describes his offence the same day as follows: "Being a citizen of Poland, [Lukasik] engaged in religious activity as a preacher of John the Baptist Pentecostal Church without permission from the Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs attached to the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus and therefore violated the regulations governing the presence of foreign citizens and persons without citizenship in the Republic of Belarus."

Myadel District Court notified Lukasik on 2 June that an 8 May local decision to annul his residency permit has been halted pending his court appeal. But Lukanin pointed out to Forum 18 that a second deportation order under which he must leave the country by the end of 7 June is still in force.

On the same morning of Pastor Bokun's second arrest and for the first time since November 2006, Lukanin added, police noted the registration numbers of vehicles arriving for Sunday worship at his own charismatic New Life Church. Also on the evening of 3 June, ONT state television channel aired an item on its news review Kontury warning about the dangers of "neo-Pentecostal sects". "That means us," Lukanin complained.

A summary of the programme on the ONT website (http://ont.by/index.php?id_kontur=1130) notes that Jehovah's Witnesses and neo-Pentecostals are the fastest growing "non-traditional cults": "With the aid of psychotechnology the pastor drives people out of their minds," it remarks. "But neo-Pentecostals have shown themselves to be most active in Ukraine. It has been proved that they were the ones behind the Orange Revolution."

New Life Church's legal position continues to be uncertain. The Minsk authorities have both refused to recognise its disused barn as a house of worship and threatened to demolish the property (see most recently F18News 30 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=966).

Minsk city authorities rejected a request by Aleksei Shein for permission to hold an 8 June demonstration in support of religious freedom on Bangalore Square, the Belarus-based Christian Human Rights House reported on 4 June. The authorities claimed that the application he submitted was not correctly formulated. This is the second such refusal issued to the co-chairman of the organisational committee of the Belarusian Christian Democracy movement (see F18News 16 May 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=957). At some distance from Minsk city centre, demonstrations are normally permitted at Bangalore Square (see F18News 20 October 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=858).

Pastor Bokun is the third person to receive a prison sentence for religious activity in post-Soviet Belarus. Apparently due to heightened state sensitivity towards unauthorised gatherings during the March 2006 presidential election period, Reformed Baptist pastor Georgi Vyazovsky and religious freedom lawyer Sergei Shavtsov were handed down ten-day sentences for organising unapproved religious events. Tsvor, the Pentecostal bishop, was only spared a possibly similar fate due to the expiry of the legal deadline for his prosecution (see 13 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=743 and 27 March 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=750). (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>

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