

23 June 2008

BELARUS: Highest fine yet for Baptists

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Belarus has imposed a fine of more than two months' average wages on a Baptist who "organised choir singing and conducted conversations on religious topics" outside Ushachi public market, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. After a plain clothes policeman told a group of Baptists from outside the area to stop, Vladimir Burshtyn replied that they were not disturbing public order and cited religious freedom guarantees in Belarus' Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The fine is, to Forum 18's knowledge, the highest yet imposed on Baptists for unregistered religious activity. Higher fines have been imposed on members of other communities. Olga Karchevskaya, an official who witnessed the incident, defended the state's response and the Religion Law's restrictions because "we need to know who's coming to us - they could be destructive or acting against people's interests." In a separate incident, a Baptist congregation's worship in Osipovichy was interrupted by officials, and the congregation's deacon was fined about two weeks' average wages for leading an unregistered religious community.

A court in Belarus has handed down a fine of 700,000 Belarusian Roubles (1,697 Norwegian Kroner, 211 Euros or 329 US Dollars) – more than two months' average wages – to Vladimir Burshtyn, a Baptist who "organised choir singing and conducted conversations on religious topics" outside a public market, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. A local official who witnessed the preaching defended the state's response on 20 June, pointing out to Forum 18 that, "It's common courtesy to introduce yourself and say what you want if you visit someone's home."

Marking Ascension Day on 5 June (many Protestants in the former Soviet Union follow the Julian Calendar), a group of Baptists began evangelising outside a market in the town of Ushachi (Vitebsk [Vitsyebsk] Region), Baptists stated on 10 June. A plain clothes policeman then told Burshtyn, that the Baptists should stop as they did not have permission from Ushachi District Executive Committee. Burshtyn replied that the group was not disturbing public order but "preaching the gospel as God instructed." He also cited religious freedom guarantees in Belarus' 1994 Constitution (Article 31) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 18).

After the arrival of Olga Karchevskaya, a vice-chair of Ushachi District Executive Committee, Burshtyn was escorted to a local police station and charged under Article 23.34, Part 2 of the Administrative Violations Code (violation of regulations for holding demonstrations or other mass events). A local court fined him later the same day.

A member of the nearest Baptist Council of Churches congregation to Ushachi, some 35 kms (20 miles) to the south-east in Lepel [Lyepel'], Olga Plisko told Forum 18 on 16 June that the Baptists involved were not local. She said she knew that they were preparing to appeal against the fine, however.

Religious activity without state permission has often been punished with large fines. In 2006, for example, the administrator of the charismatic New Life Church in the capital Minsk was fined 3,825,000 Belarusian Roubles (then 11,645 Norwegian Kroner, 1,488 Euros or 1,780 US Dollars). This was the third occasion he had been fined for unregistered religious activity (see F18News 25 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=676). Similarly, in 2005, the Pastor of a Pentecostal church was fined 4,650,000 Belarusian Roubles (14,225 Norwegian Kroner, 1,696 Euros or 2,171 US Dollars), for baptising 70 people in a lake (see F18News 28 September 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=847).

To Forum 18's knowledge, the fine imposed on Burshtyn is the highest yet received in Belarus by a member of the Baptist Council of Churches. This body broke away from the Soviet government-recognised Baptist Union in 1961 in protest at regulations preventing missionary activity and religious instruction to children. Refusing on principle to register with the authorities in post-Soviet countries, Council congregations regularly face prosecution in Belarus and other states where – in breach of international human rights standards - registration is mandatory.

Olga Karchevskaya of Ushachi District Executive Committee insisted on 20 June that she had nothing against preaching the Bible – "we're all believers nowadays," or Baptists – "we have our own Baptists here and regard them positively." However, the approximately 20 Baptist adults and children singing and preaching in Ushachi had violated Belarus' 2002 Religion Law, she maintained to Forum 18. In addition to breaching the Law's territorial restrictions on religious activity by travelling 650 kms (400 miles) from Brest Region, she said, they should have obtained prior permission from Ushachi District Executive Committee: "If they

had shown us registration documents – proving they have the legal right to hold such a mass meeting – there would have been no problem. But they didn't."

Karchevskaya, who also chairs Ushachi District's commission ensuring compliance with the 2002 Law, stressed to Forum 18 that preaching has to be within the law, "as in Norway, Germany or anywhere else." But the Baptists who visited Ushachi refuse to abide by Belarusian law, she suggested: "They say they don't recognise any secular law, only their own." The 2002 Law's territorial restrictions and requirement for permission are necessary, she maintained, because, "We need to know who's coming to us - they could be destructive or acting against people's interests."

"It's common courtesy to introduce yourself and say what you want if you visit someone's home," Karchevskaya continued. While the Baptists preached and sang using amplification, however, on this occasion, "no one was really listening as they didn't know who they were," she told Forum 18.

In another recent case in the town of Osipovichy [Asipovichy] (Mogilev [Mahilyow] Region), the head of the local district Ideology Department, a department specialist and three police officers interrupted Sunday worship at the house of Mikhail Sotnichenko on 18 May, the Council of Churches reported on 15 June. Following the service Sotnichenko, the congregation's deacon, was charged with leading an unregistered religious community (Article 9.9, Part 1 of the Administrative Violations Code).

On 30 May Osipovichy District Court fined Sotnichenko 140,000 Belarusian Roubles (339 Norwegian Kroner, 42 Euros or 66 US Dollars) – or approximately two weeks' average wages. Arguing the decision to be unconstitutional and in violation of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he lodged an appeal with Mogilev Regional Court on 7 June.

Mogilev Regional Court rejected Sotnichenko's appeal on 19 June, a court spokesperson told Forum 18 on 20 June.

Both Sotnichenko and Zemlyanukhina declined to comment to Forum 18 when contacted on 19 and 20 June.

In 2007 Pastor Gennadi Ryzhkov of the same congregation was fined for leading a harvest festival service in Sotnichenko's back yard. On that occasion, Zemlyanukhina described the church as "an illegitimate organisation" and insisted to Forum 18 that in order to meet it must first register with the authorities. Sotnichenko told Forum 18 that the 100-strong congregation did not agree with the state's action and would carry on meeting for worship (see F18News 22 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1051).

Up until 2004, fines for unregistered religious activity were usually relatively low - equivalent to several days' average wages - and for the most part encountered by congregations of the Baptist Council of Churches. They and other unregistered independent Protestant churches reported 17 such fines in 2003 to 2004. While the analogous figure for 2005 to 2006 was 12, those fines were on several occasions significantly higher – ranging from the equivalent of two weeks' to two months' average wages.

Seven fines reported by the Baptist Council of Churches in 2007 and early 2008 – one of which was later annulled - ranged from approximately two weeks' average wages (see eg. F18News 14 September 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1018) to a month's average wages (see eg. F18News 8 February 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1085). (END)

For a personal commentary by Antoni Bokun, Pastor of a Pentecostal Church in Minsk, on Belarusian citizens' struggle to reclaim their history as a land of religious freedom, see F18News 22 May 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1131.

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

Full reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Belarus can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=16>.

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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