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RUSSIA: City justice dept claims church stealing was conducted legally

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

Moscow city's justice department has failed to explain to Forum 18 News Service why it allowed the founding document of a Methodist Church to be altered without the knowledge or consent of the church, thus facilitating the "sale" of the building to new "owners". Guards hired by these "owners" have seized the building, with the pastor and church officials remaining inside. Aleksandr Buksman, head of the local city registration department for religious organisations, has claimed to Forum 18 that the demands of Russia's religion law "were fully observed by the religious organisation". This claim is very strongly disputed by the church, which points out to Forum 18 that a "meeting" Buksman refers to was not authorised by the church, did not involve church members, and was not held on church premises. Buksman has failed to explain why his department did not check any of this with the church leadership.

The senior official of Moscow's justice department has failed to explain to Forum 18 News Service why it amended the founding document last year of the Kwan Lim (Kvanrim) Methodist Church in northern Moscow without the knowledge of the church, thus facilitating the building being "sold" to new "owners". These "owners" have used guards to seize the building, with the pastor and church officials remaining inside. Church officials and the Methodist Bishop for Russia suspect that the reason for the document change may be local city corruption. (See F18News 15 December 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=214)

In a written response on 16 December to Forum 18's enquiries about the transfer, the head of the registration department for religious organisations, Aleksandr Buksman, claimed that in presenting the amended documents, the demands of the country's religion law "were fully observed by the religious organisation", a claim denied by the Methodist church. He said his department therefore registered the amended founding document with its new leadership on 23 May 2002.

Buksman claimed that the amendments to the founding document and the approval of a new leadership "had been taken, as is apparent from the documents presented, at a general meeting of the religious organisation on 24 April 2002". The Methodists claim no such valid church meeting took place and that those who registered the amended founding document had done so after a meeting not authorised by the church, not involving church members and not held on church premises. Buksman failed to explain why his department did not check up the validity of the amendments with the church leadership.

Buksman told Forum 18 that the investigation department of the internal affairs department for Moscow's Northern Administrative Region launched a criminal case on 30 October last year into accusations of "large-scale swindling" over the church building. He said his department had presented documents related to the amendment to the church's founding document to the investigation, which were added to the case documents. He said his department had no information about the further course of the investigation. Church members say the criminal case has now been closed.

"The meeting had nothing to do with the church, no church members took part," Svetlana Kim, church administrator told Forum 18 on 16 December. Kim told Forum 18 there has been no change to the blockade of the church. "The guards are still there." She said the church is doing all it can to resolve the issue peacefully through negotiation.

Maksim Zubov, an official of the federal Justice Ministry told Forum 18 on 15 December that his department would investigate the issue with the Moscow city justice department, and noted that "no-one has the right to change the founding document of a religious organisation without its knowledge."

For more background information see Forum 18's latest religious freedom survey at

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=116

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>

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