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DONBAS: Luhansk: Baptist Union Churches forced to halt public worship

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

Officials of the unrecognised Luhansk People's Republic threatened Baptist Union pastors not to meet for worship, sending "a clear message that they will not tolerate such meetings for worship any more". Officials regard all Protestant churches as "illegal". 82-year-old independent Baptist pastor Anatoly Tolstenko faces court on 21 March.

Officials of the unrecognised Luhansk People's Republic in eastern Ukraine have ordered Baptist Union churches to halt their public worship or risk punishment. "Officials earlier didn't insist that our churches should not meet for worship," Pastor Igor Bandura of the Ukrainian Baptist Union told Forum 18. "But they have now sent a clear message that they will not tolerate such meetings for worship any more."

"All Baptist churches that have prayer houses will halt meetings in them, so Sunday worship and other services from 17 March onwards will not take place," Pastor Bandura added. He said church members fear that if they do not halt their worship, officials could raid their worship meetings or arrest church leaders (see below).

The LPR authorities have rejected all registration applications from Protestant communities. "Unfortunately the situation for all Protestant churches is bad," a Protestant from a different community in contact with fellow church members in the region told Forum 18 from the Ukrainian capital Kyiv on 14 March. "We do not have registration in the LPR and do not have the right to meet in our buildings, which have been closed."

Meanwhile, about ten masked and armed fighters raided a worship meeting in February of Path of Salvation independent Baptist church in the city of Luhansk. The church's 82-year-old pastor, Anatoly Tolstenko, is due again in court on 21 March accused of leading "illegal worship" (see below).

During a search, the men seized books which the authorities of the unrecognised entity have banned as "extremist", including Jehovah's Witness publications. Friends of the community insist the armed fighters planted the books. "These were not their books – the men planted them," Sergei Kosyak, a Protestant and former resident of Donetsk, told Forum 18 (see below).

Elsewhere, court bailiffs in Krasnodon have demanded that the pastor of a Council of Churches Baptist congregation, Vladimir Rytikov, must surrender his 1987 Volkswagen on 21 March to meet an unpaid fine and expenses of nearly 9,000 Russian Roubles (the LPR uses the Russian Rouble). The head of the Krasnodon bailiffs told Forum 18 she was not authorised to discuss with third parties moves to recover debts from individuals (see below).

On 30 November 2018, armed and uniformed officers of the State Security Ministry secret police stopped a 22-year-old man as he was driving near Stanitsa Luhanska. After finding a Jehovah's Witness business card in his car they took him to their base in Luhansk and beat him severely. The young man "was subjected to brutal treatment belittling his human dignity and to a restriction on his right to freedom of religion and belief", Jehovah's Witnesses complained to Forum 18 (see below).

The rebel LPR authorities have banned all exercise of freedom of religion or belief by communities that did not gain registration with their Justice Ministry by the extended deadline of 15 October 2018. Those rejected include all Protestant communities. Communities which did not apply, such as Jehovah's Witnesses (who knew they would not be accepted) and Council of Churches Baptists (who choose not to seek registration on principle), are likewise regarded as "illegal" (see below).

Official threats lead Baptist Union churches to halt worship

Threats by LPR officials that they will not tolerate continued open public meetings for worship in Baptist Union congregations have led local church leaders reluctantly to halt such open worship. "They invited our local leaders in, and warned them not to meet," Pastor Igor Bandura of the Ukrainian Baptist Union told Forum 18 from Kyiv on 14 March. "In some cases they were very direct, speaking with no hesitation. Others were more indirect."

Church members fear that if they hold public worship, they will risk raids and possible arrest or other punishment.

Most of the 48 Baptist Union congregations have a recognised prayer house, Pastor Bandura added. He said their Sunday worship meetings on 10 March were the last public services. "All Baptist churches that have prayer houses will halt meetings in them, so Sunday worship and other services from 17 March onwards will not take place."

Pastor Bandura said local church members believe they are under surveillance and that their phone calls are listened in to. They have warned pastors in Ukrainian government controlled territory that if they try to visit the region they risk being arrested. Some local pastors have already left the region.

In July 2018, the LPR State Security Ministry announced that it had banned the "destructive activity of the extremist religious organisation the All-Ukrainian Union of Evangelical Christian/Baptist Churches". The Ministry claimed that the Baptist Union "with its headquarters in Kyiv" had refused to submit to compulsory state registration locally. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2401)

Luhansk: Raid on worship, prosecution of 82-year-old pastor

About ten masked and armed fighters raided a worship meeting in February of Path of Salvation independent Baptist church in the city of Luhansk. The intruders searched the premises, claiming to find "banned" literature, including Jehovah's Witness publications and a translation of the book "Hitler's Cross" by American Protestant pastor Erwin Lutzer, which examined the way churches stayed silent in Nazi Germany.

"These were not their books – the men planted them," Sergei Kosyak, a Protestant and former resident of Donetsk, told Forum 18 on 13 March.

The intruders drew up records of an "offence" of conducting "illegal worship" against the pastor, 82-year-old Anatoly Tolstenko, and two church members.

A case against Pastor Tolstenko was sent to a Luhansk court. It was due to be heard on 5 March, but postponed to 12 March. The case is now due to be heard on 21 March, Kosyak told Forum 18.

An official of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, who did not give her name, refused to discuss with Forum 18 on 14 March why Pastor Tolstenko is facing punishment for exercising his right to freedom of religion or belief.

The rebel authorities brought Pastor Tolstenko to court earlier to punish him for exercising freedom of religion or belief. But on that occasion he won the case, Kosyak added.

Krasnodon: Seizing car for unpaid fine and fees

Court bailiffs in Krasnodon [official Ukrainian name Sorokyne] have demanded that Baptist Pastor Vladimir Rytikov must surrender his 1987 Volkswagen on 21 March to meet an unpaid fine and expenses of 8,985 Russian Roubles (the LPR uses the Russian Rouble).

Pastor Rytikov, who is 59, leads the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the town of Krasnodon, just a few kilometres from the eastern border with Russia. Like all Council of Churches congregations it does not seek official registration.

Officials raided the church's regular Sunday meeting for worship in June 2018. Pastor Rytikov refused to pay a fine of 8,000 Russian Roubles (about five weeks' average wages for those in formal work) handed down on 11 July 2018 to punish him for leading an unapproved worship meeting. Krasnodon Town and District Court rejected Pastor Rytikov's appeal against the fine the following month. (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425)

On 27 September, court bailiffs opened proceedings to recover the money for the unpaid fine. On 18 October, they came to Pastor Rytikov's home in Krasnodon and summoned him to court that day. There, he told Judge Yuliya Kudrevatykh that he had no intention of paying the fine because he does not regard himself as guilty of any wrongdoing.

Judge Kudrevatykh found him guilty under Administrative Code Article 20.26, Part 1 of failing to pay the fine. She handed him an additional punishment of 20 hours' community service, according to the decision seen by Forum 18.

Pastor Rytikov appealed against this extra punishment to the LPR Supreme Court in Luhansk. On 14 November 2018, the court overturned the community service punishment. More than 50 fellow Baptists attended the hearing to support Pastor Rytikov, presenting him with flowers. However, the July 2018 fine remained in force.

On 9 November 2018, four court bailiffs had come to Pastor Rytikov's home, going through all the rooms, recording what property he had and taking photographs, Baptists told Forum 18. "We told them Jesus loves them, and sang the hymn "The love of Christ is immeasurably great!," Pastor Rytikov noted after the bailiffs had left.

Court bailiff Yuliya Getman, in a 28 February 2019 order (seen by Forum 18), said Pastor Rytikov owed 8,000 Russian Roubles from the unpaid fine, a bailiffs' fee of 800 Russian Roubles and expenses in recovering the money of 185 Russian Roubles. She put a restraining order on his car and ordered him not to dispose of any of his other property.

In a 4 March order, also seen by Forum 18, the head of the Krasnodon bailiffs, Natalya Komissarova, ordered Pastor Rytikov to present his car to bailiffs on the morning of 21 March. She warned him that failing to abide by this would constitute an administrative offence with fines of 1,000 to 3,000 Russian Roubles.

Komissarova told Forum 18 on 14 March she was not authorised to discuss with third parties moves to recover debts from individuals. Asked if it is right to seize property from individuals like Pastor Rytikov who have been punished for exercising freedom of religion or belief, Komissarova responded: "We are a law-bound state and we all have our duties. He had the chance to appeal against his fine."

Stanitsa Luhanska: Stopped, detained, beaten, threatened

On 30 November 2018, armed and uniformed men from the State Security Ministry stopped a 22-year-old man as he was driving near Stanitsa Luhanska after his return to LPR-controlled territory, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. They seized his mobile phone, searched his car and found a Jehovah's Witness business card. They told him Jehovah's Witnesses, their website, literature and preaching had all been banned since February 2018. They detained him and took him to Luhansk to the former building of the Ukrainian Security Service.

The officers made the young man wait two hours before beginning their interrogation. They handcuffed the young man and ban to beat him, apparently using a book. "During this the armed men tried to get information from him about Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as his involvement in this religion," Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Officers asked him where the communities meet, who the elders are and when he was baptised.

The officers then took the young man from office to office after pulling a hat over his eyes. While he was in a corridor, one man issued a command: "You can". Someone hit the young man in the solar plexus, Jehovah's Witnesses complained. The young man asked to be allowed to phone his wife, but one of the officers told him: "You've disappeared without trace."

After six hours of interrogation, the officers took him to his home to conduct a search, expecting to confiscate religious literature. They seized several books. He was then released. Officers threatened the young man and his wife with imprisonment if they follow their faith, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

The young man "was subjected to brutal treatment belittling his human dignity and to a restriction on his right to freedom of religion and belief", Jehovah's Witnesses complained.

Who can still meet for worship?

Following the adoption of a local Religion Law in February 2018, all religious communities were required to re-register. Those that failed to do so would be deemed "illegal". (http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2425)

Following the re-registration deadline of 15 October 2018, the authorities regard many religious communities as illegal. All Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist and Pentecostal communities are among those denied re-registration. Even though no decision appears to have been adopted, officials have repeatedly said Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned since early 2018.

Colleagues of Andrei Litsoev, head of the Religious Organisations and Spirituality Department of the Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry in Luhansk, told Forum 18 on 14 March that he was not in the office. One official refused to discuss the problems many religious communities have faced gaining registration. "These are not our decisions," she insisted. She claimed "very many" religious communities have gained registration.

Officials at the Justice Ministry in Luhansk, which manages the registration process, referred Forum 18 on 15 March to Aleksandr Kirpa, who heads the section dealing with religious organisations. However, he categorically refused to give Forum 18 any information about the number of re-registered religious organisations, of what community they were, or why all Protestant communities that applied were rejected.

The Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry list of "religious organisations" on its website includes communities of only three faiths: the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, one Jewish community (which was registered in mid-August 2018) and one

Muslim community. Hare Krishna devotees outside the region told Forum 18 in October 2018 that their community had been registered.

However, two Catholic communities and two parishes of the newly-established Orthodox Church of Ukraine (which were formerly under the Kyiv Patriarchate) still function, despite not having registration.

The Roman Catholic parish in Luhansk (which also has a chapel in nearby Stakhanov), served by one priest, still functions, as does a Greek Catholic parish in Luhansk, also served by one priest, an official of the Catholic Diocese of Kharkiv-Zaporozhia told Forum 18 on 14 March. The Nuncio, Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, again visited Luhansk from Kyiv in mid-February, together with Jan Sobilo, assistant bishop of Kharkiv-Zaporozhia. The diocesan official said they hope the parishes' status will soon be clarified.

The two parishes of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine are served by three priests and one deacon. "Police and other officials come, check and say we must register," Bishop Afanasi (Yavorsky) of Luhansk and Starobilsk (who is based in the Ukrainian government controlled part of Luhansk Region) told Forum 18 on 14 March. "They are constantly checking us." The Bishop insists the parishes will not seek registration from the LPR authorities. (END)

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