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BELARUS: More Baptist pastors fined

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

Forum 18 News Service has learnt of further recent incidents in which unregistered Baptist pastors have been fined for holding worship services. The fines were issued under the Belarusian administrative offences code, which punishes "the creation and leadership of a religious organisation without registering its charter (statutes) in accordance with established procedure." The estimated 29 congregations in Belarus belonging to a Moscow-based Baptist union which rejects state registration on principle have increasingly been targeted in this way since the introduction of the republic's 2002 religion law. The law explicitly states that registration is compulsory for all religious communities.

Police have twice fined a Baptist pastor the maximum sum of 87,500 Belarusian roubles (292 Norwegian kroner, 37 Euros or 42 US dollars) in recent months for leading home worship in the town of Lelchitsy, Gomel (Homyel') region, the International Union of Baptist Churches told Forum 18 News Service on 11 February.

The Union also reports that another of its pastors, Valeri Trifan, was summoned for questioning on 3 February by local officials in the town of Soligorsk, Minsk region, "in connection with the receipt of a statement determining that an infringement of the law has taken place." Pastor Trifan – who has six children – has reportedly been fined a total of 183,000 Belarusian roubles (610 Norwegian kroner, 78 Euros or 89 US dollars) over the past two years for hosting an unregistered Baptist congregation at his home.

The average annual salary in Belarus is estimated to be 128 US dollars (885 Norwegian kroner, 102 Euros, or 276,857 Belarusian roubles).

These fines were all handed down under Article 193 of the Belarusian administrative offences code, which punishes "the creation and leadership of a religious organisation without registering its charter (statutes) in accordance with established procedure." Since the November 2002 adoption in Belarus of a law which explicitly outlaws unregistered worship by religious communities, congregations in the republic belonging to the Moscow-based International Union of Baptist Churches have increasingly found their pastors to be subject to fines under Article 193. The Union, originally formed in 1961, adheres to a rigid principle of separation of church and state according to which none of its current 3,705 congregations throughout the former Soviet Union are registered.

Forum 18 News has already reported how three of the Union's pastors in Belarus were fined a total of 222,500 Belarusian roubles (742 Norwegian kroner, 94 Euros or 108 US dollars) in 2003 for leading unregistered congregations in Gomel and Vitebsk (Vitsyebk) regions. (See F18News 3 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=243) During one incident, a police officer demanded that a pastor remove a "Prayer House" sign from the exterior wall of his own village home. "Systematic" home worship is also illegal under the 2002 religion law (even by registered communities), although the unregistered Baptists argue in their most recent statement that it "does not disturb public order."

Speaking to Forum 18 in Vitebsk on 23 September 2003, the region's state official in charge of religious affairs confirmed that the unregistered activity of the Union of Baptist Churches was illegal in Belarus. "I tried to talk to them, but they have existed like that for three decades," Nikolai Stepanenko lamented. While they thus appear to be outside the law, the State Committee for Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Minsk numbers the Union's communities in Belarus at 29.

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

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=195

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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