FORUM 18 NEWS SERVICE, Oslo, Norway
https://www.forum18.org/
The right to believe, to worship and witness
The right to change one's belief or religion
The right to join together and express one's belief

13 April 2004

RUSSIA: Jehovah's Witness rental contracts cancelled

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

In the wake of the recent Moscow court decision prohibiting all Jehovah's Witness religious activities in the city, some local congregations across Russia have this month had rental contracts either cancelled or threatened with cancellation by landlords, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The congregations known to be affected are in St Petersburg, Moscow, Vladimir, Yekaterinburg in the Urals, Krasnoyarsk, and Khabarovsk in the far east of Russia. The landlords' decisions appear to be related to misunderstandings of the nature of the Moscow court decision. In the Vladimir case, the Jehovah's Witnesses were told that they could use a venue "as long as they had the approval of a local Orthodox priest."

In the wake of the recent Moscow ban (see F18News 29 March 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=289), a number of landlords across Russia either cancelled or threatened to cancel rental contracts previously concluded with local congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. According to Jehovah's Witness spokesman Christian Presber, congregations in Moscow, Yekaterinburg and the Far Eastern city of Khabarovsk have had such contracts cancelled outright, while a landlord in Krasnoyarsk threatened to annul a similar agreement but did not do so thanks to the efforts of a local religious studies specialist.

Speaking to Forum 18 on 8 April, Presber reported that one Moscow congregation had arranged to hold its 4 April service in commemoration of Christ's death at the premises of a Russian-Dutch hotel in the city, but that the concern's administration cancelled the agreement due to the Moscow ban. He pointed out, however, that the community was able to use the Jehovah's Witnesses' own Kingdom Hall complex in the Russian capital, where 38 other congregations gathered in shifts in five worship halls.

Even prior to 4 April, Urals regional news website "Novy Region" ("New Region") warned of a possible scandal should 700 members of the "banned sect" of Jehovah's Witnesses gather for worship on that date at a house of culture in Yekaterinburg (approximately 1400km east of Moscow). On 31 March the website reported that the house of culture's administrator had already tried to annul the congregation's contract following the 26 March Moscow court decision, adding that "representatives of the security services strongly advised him to avoid the possibility of a scandal."

On 3 April the same website announced that the house of culture's administrative staff had cancelled the Jehovah's Witnesses' 4 April arrangements "in connection with a court decision banning the activity of this religious organisation in Russia and in order to avoid a massive scandal." On 7 April Dmitri Bykov of the Jehovah's Witnesses' Russian administrative centre in St Petersburg told Forum 18 that the Yekaterinburg congregation was able to find an alternative hall in the city for its meeting, but "with difficulty."

The local religious studies specialist in Krasnoyarsk (approximately 3200 km east of Moscow) who spoke with an administrator who threatened to cancel a similar rental agreement with local Jehovah's Witnesses, Lyudmila Grigoryeva told Forum 18 on 9 April that the situation had been resolved relatively easily. "People who rent out halls aren't specialists," she explained. "They just heard about the Moscow ban and didn't look into what sort of court decision it was or whether it had legal force." Grigoryeva added that she is currently setting up "Tolerance," a consultation centre which will deal primarily with religious freedom issues in the region, "precisely so that we can avoid this kind of situation."

Christian Presber told Forum 18 that in each of the recent instances where Jehovah's Witnesses had their contracts cancelled, they had already paid rental fees, "but these were returned." He also maintained that in every case local state officials pressurised administrators into cancelling agreements on the basis of the Moscow court decision, even though this relates only to the Russian capital and is not in force pending the Jehovah's Witnesses' municipal court appeal. Speaking to Forum 18 on 9 April, the press secretary of Moscow City's Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations, Konstantin Blazhenov, remarked that the Moscow ban was not in force as far as he knew.

In St Petersburg, Dmitri Bykov told Forum 18 that several groups of Jehovah's Witnesses had similarly been forced to find alternative premises for their 4 April services. According to Christian Presber, a local congregation staging a religious convention in Vladimir (approximately 200km east of Moscow) in two weeks' time has also had a rental agreement annulled by stadium administrative staff. "When they went to a second venue, the administrator told them that they could use it," he remarked, "as long as they had the approval of a local Orthodox priest."

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2004

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

---

If you need to contact F18News, please email us at:
f18news @ editor.forum18.org

Forum 18
Postboks 6603
Rodeløkka
N-0502 Oslo
NORWAY

Copyright Forum18 News Service 2004