

22 September 2004

RUSSIA: Suspicious fire guts Baptist church after authorities break up meeting

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

As Baptists were putting up a tent on privately-rented land in a village near Moscow on 20 August, administration officials demanded they provide advance notice of their two-day meeting. The Baptists refused, arguing that they did not need to for a non-political event. Several hundred armed police and secret police officers, "prepared as if for a terrorist attack" as Pastor Nikolai Dudenkov told Forum 18 News Service, invaded the site after the local administration banned the event. Workers pulled down the tent, but 4,000 Baptists went ahead with the meeting under police surveillance. On 10 September, local Baptist Yelena Kareyev told Forum 18, her teenage sons saw one of the officers involved in the raid lurking in woods behind their church. Three days later the building went up in flames and Kareyev saw men running away. She said the fire brigade was in no hurry to put out the fire.

Three weeks after hundreds of armed law enforcement personnel attempted to break up their religious gathering in a privately-rented field, Baptists in Moscow region have claimed to Forum 18 News Service that one of the men involved in the raid had been seen loitering near their village prayer house just days before it was destroyed by fire.

According to a 27 August statement received by Forum 18 from the International Union of Baptist Churches, problems began on 20 August, when some 70 church members in the village of Lyubuchany (Chekhov district, Moscow region) were erecting a tent on a field rented by one of their number, Viktor Chekanov, in preparation for a two-day religious meeting. Local administration officials approached the group and requested advance notification of the event in accordance with Russia's demonstrations law, claims the statement, but the Baptists refused to comply, arguing that their 21-22 August meeting was "an exclusively religious event ...on private territory... bearing no relation to mass meetings or demonstrations".

Forum 18 notes that under the 1997 religion law, an unregistered religious group - such as those affiliated to the International Union of Baptist Churches - may freely conduct its activities on premises "provided for the use of the group by its participants" (Article 7). Under the June 2004 demonstrations law, organisers of a public event, gathering or mass meeting - whose aim is the free expression or formation of opinions and/or demands relating to political or social issues - must inform the state authorities in advance about their plans (Article 4).

Moscow Pastor Nikolai Dudenkov described to Forum 18 in Lyubuchany on 18 September how up to 200 law enforcement personnel - including police, FSB (secret police), riot police and officers of the organised crime squad - arrived in the village later on 20 August "prepared as if for a terrorist attack". According to the Baptists' statement, personnel wearing camouflage, helmets, gas masks and machine guns cordoned off the field and proceeded to comb it with dogs. When one Baptist tried to photograph what was happening, claims the statement, an officer from the organised crime squad dislocated his finger as he made a grab for the camera.

Dudenkov told Forum 18 that when the Baptists refused to remove their tent, benches and other property from the site, a team of some 30 Uzbek migrant labourers carried out this order, "some very reluctantly". The Baptists' property was later returned, he said, albeit with some damage.

When the Baptists' approximately 4,000 guests arrived from all over central European Russia for the gathering on the morning of 21 August, continued Dudenkov, they found access to the field blocked, while the bus which usually serves Lyubuchany did not stop in the village on that day. According to the Baptists' statement, only persons with local residence registration were allowed through police checkpoints on approach roads to the village. Dudenkov told Forum 18 that all but approximately 200 guests managed to reach the field on foot, however, despite rough and threatening behaviour from the law enforcement officers.

On being denied access to the Baptists' tent, for example, local pensioner and several times prisoner-of-conscience Vasili Ryzhuk explained that he wanted to pray there, recalled Dudenkov. "You will not pray to God here!" a law enforcement official reportedly replied, and when Ryzhuk nevertheless started to pray he was put in an armlock, hustled into a car and taken to a nearby police station, Dudenkov reported. Ryzhuk was swiftly released when his heart condition started to worsen.

According to the Baptists' statement, the whole operation was conducted in accordance with a 20 August local instruction issued by

the acting head of Chekhov administration, Anatoli Chibeskov, of which Forum 18 has seen a copy. Entitled "On Measures to Prevent Events of a Religious Nature Taking Place in Lyubuchany Village," it prohibits "unsanctioned events of a religious nature" in the village during the period 20-31 August, charges local police and "relevant services" with the task of preventing such events and specifies the evacuation of participants if necessary.

In fact, the Baptists reported, the religious gathering did go ahead while observed and filmed by law enforcement officers, even though the water supply to the tent was cut, all but one of the village shops closed and the electricity supply to the village shut down – until it was realised that the Baptists had their own generator. Showing Forum 18 the field on 18 September – which is within sight of, but not close to, the nearest houses and bears no traces of the August event except for several tent post holes – Dudenkov maintained that the only disturbance to residents was a single car alarm.

However, an assistant head of Chekhov administration insisted to Forum 18 that the authorities had acted in response to complaints from local citizens about "disturbance" caused by the Baptists' event. Sergei Yudin also confirmed that his superior had issued the local instruction to prevent the event in accordance with a 20 August decision by Chekhov's Council of Deputies, and maintained that even if the gathering was religious and held on a privately rented field, as "an event of a mass nature" it still required advance notification by law.

"There were about 5,000 participants," Yudin told Forum 18 on 21 September. "Someone has to take responsibility for an event like that, but their faith exempts them from notifying the authorities, apparently." Asked why the authorities had chosen to stop the event from taking place in the manner reported by the Baptists rather than bringing charges against any individual in response to a specific alleged violation, Yudin was at first unable to respond but then remarked that "it is not our function as the executive branch to bring charges".

While in Lyubuchany on 18 September, Forum 18 also spoke with another member of the Baptist congregation, Yelena Kareyev. She described how, on the evening of 10 September, her teenage sons again saw the man who dislocated the finger of the young Baptist during the August events. According to Kareyev, he was loitering with another man in the birch forest at the back of the private building on the Kareyevs' land which serves as the Baptists' prayer house. While the two men moved away when they realised they had been seen, she said, they were later spotted observing the prayer house from a different angle.

Three days later, on the night of 13-14 September, Yelena Kareyev told Forum 18 that she woke up at approximately 4am to the sound of breaking glass and saw several people running away from the prayer house, which was engulfed in smoke. When flames swept the building following an explosion soon afterwards, Kareyev continued, she rang the emergencies number and said that the prayer house was on fire. "So what?" the person on the other end of the telephone reportedly replied. Only after Kareyev explained that nearby houses might catch fire did the person assure her that the incident was being recorded. Fire brigades from Lyubuchany and Chekhov arrived after 30 and 40 minutes respectively, she maintained, but did not hurry to extinguish the fire, which destroyed the entire building except for parts of the outside walls.

Both Kareyev and Pastor Dudenkov insisted to Forum 18 that the Lyubuchany Baptist community had encountered no previous interference of any kind, either to the 1994 construction of the prayer house and the worship services subsequently held there, or to previous religious gatherings held on the field rented by the Chekanovs.

Chekhov's fire chief Aleksandr Alekhin told Lawrence Uzzell of the US-based International Religious Freedom Watch on 21 September that a report on the Lyubuchany fire is currently being compiled and will be submitted on 23 September to the local police department, where a criminal investigation is to be opened since every witness believes that the fire was arson.

Forum 18 notes that a similar large-scale event held by the International Union of Baptist Churches in January 2004 in Tula, some 100 kilometres (60 miles) south of Chekhov, was disrupted when two powerful explosions ripped through the interior of the local congregation's prayer house the evening before (see F18News 11 February 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=251).

Forum 18 also notes that there have been a number of previous arson attacks on churches in Chekhov. On 17 April 2001, bottles filled with petrol were thrown into Grace of Christ Pentecostal church in the town a week after its pastor, Petr Barankevich, received an anonymous telephone call warning him to stop ministering in the town or else face serious problems. On 4 November 2001, a storage building and two cars at the construction site of a Presbyterian church in the town were set on fire. When Pastor Aleksandr Kepkalov and several other members of the church visited the site two days later, a group of four men reportedly told them that if they did not stop building the church they would be killed and buried there.

For more background information see Forum 18's Russia 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